Rolling Stone
MAY 2024
ISSUE 1387

The Real Billie Eilish

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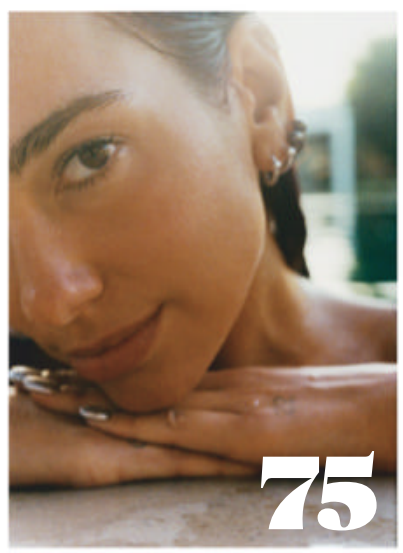

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Photography direction by Emma Reeves. Produced by Object & Animal: Emi Stewart and Alex Brinkman, executive producers; Reese Layton, creative producer; Jami Arceo and Evan Thicke, producers — motion. Styling by Spencer Singer. Tailoring by Anna Telcs. Hair by Benjamin Mohapi at Benjamin Hair Salon. Makeup by Emily Cheng at the Wall Group. Manicure by Erin Leigh Moffett at Art Department. Production designer: Grace Surnow. Leadman: Kevin Lopez. Stunt coordinator: Sara Beko. Stunt utility: Nathan Kayn. Eco Set representative: Maya El-Hage. Set medic: Jose Tony Bautista. T-shirt and pants by Olly Shinder. Shoes: Custom-made by Osiris.

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Voices *of the* Movement

PHOTOGRAPHED BY LINDSEY CHILDS

Tiffany Miranda

Tiffany Miranda is a producer, engineer, and singer, as well as the founder of the nonprofit organization Girls Make Beats. She started as a recording artist at fifteen in her native Miami, and has worked with the likes of Lil Uzi Vert, Rick Ross, DJ Khaled and Fat Joe.

Welcome to Voices of the Movement, a sponsored series presented by Olay Body. Rolling Stone and Olay Body are committed to elevating women who are a force of change in the music industry.

In this series, Olay Body brought together some of the most dynamic and inspiring female leaders from across the music industry to talk about their journeys and how they're fighting for inclusivity and representation. They are mold breakers - women who rose to the top of their occupations and are constantly searching for ways to uplift those just starting out.

PHOTOGRAPHED BY MATT FAJARDO

Ebonie Smith

Ebonie Smith is an award-winning music producer, audio engineer, and singer-songwriter, as well as the founder of Gender Amplified, a nonprofit organization that celebrates and supports women and girls in music production. She's an in-house engineer and audio producer at Atlantic Records and has served as an engineer for artists from Cardi B to Sturgill Simpson.

ROLLING STONE: WHAT DID YOUR JOURNEYS THROUGH THE MUSIC INDUSTRY LOOK LIKE?

EBONIE: I started off playing instruments in church, but what I really wanted was to play basketball. That was my vision for myself for so long. When I got to college, I realized that I was not fully using my talents as a music producer, artist and instrumentalist. That side of me had been tucked away. At the same time, basketball started to feel like a job, so I pivoted and started focusing more on music.

I knew I didn't want to be a piano player or a singer, so I worked as an audio tech at my college. That opened the door for me to start fidgeting around with microphones and cables and learning the nuts and bolts of signal flow and audio engineering.

From there, it was all about hustling to find an entry into the music business. I worked odd jobs and eventually ended up at Atlantic Records in 2013, where I've been ever since. The journey at Atlantic has been about continuing to develop my craft and not resting on my laurels.

TIFFANY: I fell in love with singing when I was eleven and really took a deeper dive into the fundamentals of music when I was fifteen. I started making waves in Miami, getting contract offers from the likes of Uncle Luke; Trina had also just started her label as well and was looking to sign artists.

Being from Miami – it's not really the most nurturing. There were instances where I wasn't being taken seriously. I remember going to the studio and being told to be cuter, be quiet, be smaller. It just didn't really sit right with me.

I decided to take matters into my own hands when I was eighteen, I got a job working for 10 hours a day just to save up for my own home recording studio. I remember being in rooms with producers and looking at everything they had. I was like, "Oh, I need Pro Tools, I need that Fantom S keyboard. If I have all the right tools, I can be just as successful."

ROLLING STONE: HOW HAS REPRESENTATION FOR WOMEN CHANGED DURING YOUR TIME IN THE MUSIC INDUSTRY?

EBONIE: I went to an all-women's college. I was surrounded by smart women all day, who engineered and produced, but I was not seeing that reflected in the outside world. It seemed that Barnard was a bit of a utopia. I started Gender Amplified; in 2007 we did our first event. Back then it was harder to find women producers, but they were there. They just all had horror stories about the business. They had their careers stilted and stalled.

That is something that I still see quite a lot of. There seems to be different types of protections that women need. They need creative protection which is the protection of their ideas. They need financial protection, which is protecting their ability to make money from their intellectual property. I think that those issues persist.

TIFFANY: The work that we do is rooted in helping to change that representation. With the advancement of technology giving people the ability to create in the comfort of their own home, it is starting to change how things look. We still have work to do. Organizations like Girls Make Beats and Gender Amplified are doing that work to make sure that women are seen, heard and felt in these spaces.

ROLLING STONE: WHAT ADVICE DO YOU GIVE TO YOUNGER WOMEN WHO ARE COMING UP IN MUSIC?

EBONIE: My advice has to do with developing confidence – and confidence is a muscle. We've been taught that either you have it, or you don't. What happens with confidence is that you must have success to develop it, right? But that means you must put yourself in enough positions to fail. I try to drive that point home as a mentor because you must develop that confidence muscle memory. That's especially important because once you get in the room, you need to show people what you can offer.

TIFFANY: There are a few things. I always tell women that the only limits you have are the ones you set on yourselves. Being able to understand that a "No" sometimes just means "not right now." You need to be a student of the craft and learn everything you possibly can learn about it. I always tell this to my girls I work with because a lot of them want to rap, or they want to sing. At our organization, we teach the fundamentals of music production, DJing, and audio engineering. We also have supplemental programming that teaches them about music business, financial literacy, how to navigate different spaces, and we bring mentors on board to assist with that. Ultimately, it's about having them know that they can do whatever they put their mind to, they just must be very well equipped.

The music industry has a long way to go when it comes to being more inclusive and accommodating for women however they show up. Tiffany Miranda, Ebonie Smith, and other women are constantly fighting for change, and, slowly but surely, they're starting to see the culture shift in promising ways. True inclusivity in the industry, Miranda says, "is about being able to be a woman and bring your authentic self to music. It's about being given the liberty to pursue your dreams."

Olay Body is committed to exploring the intersection of science and beauty, creating products that reflect every hue and shape. Grounded in their dedication to representation and empowerment, Olay Body is supporting women who are fighting to make their professions more inclusive.

Presented by OLAY BODY

Contributors

COVER STORY

It's a Bird! It's a Plane! It's Billie Eilish!

Aidan Zamiri
Photographer

When Aidan Zamiri asked Billie Eilish if she'd be up for incorporating harness work into the photo shoot for this issue's cover story (p. 42), he found that she was already trained in aerial dancing. "I had no idea," says the Glasgow-born photographer, marveling at the coincidence. Zamiri has explored his interest in "[making] something impossible happen" with forward-thinking musicians like Caroline Polachek and FKA Twigs in the past — and this star turned out to be particularly down to experiment. "Billie was really interested in things that made us question the perspective," he says.

Zamiri and Eilish

Spencer Singer
Stylist

For Spencer Singer, collaboration is the key to nailing a project. He worked closely with Zamiri to achieve a raw, rugged aesthetic for Eilish's cover look. The pair centered those harnesses as an intentional style choice. "They're quite fashionable," says Singer, who's based in London and New York. In order to successfully incorporate the harnesses, suspensions, and rigs into the shot, Singer tapped into his prior experience with similar tools on a Nike campaign last fall. He also drew on his background studying art history at the New School.

Looking for Country's Next Phenomenon

Joseph Hudak
Senior Music Editor

No one can spot the next big thing in country music quite like Joseph Hudak, who has been leading *Rolling Stone*'s coverage from Nashville since 2014. "Country music right now is having a moment that we probably haven't seen since the Nineties," he says. For "Country's New Cowboy Era" (p. 26), a five-story package, Hudak put together reports on Red Dirt music (the "biggest boom," he says), the impact of the opioid epidemic on musicians, and more.

Fighting Fake Porn on the Internet

Lorena O'Neil
Contributor

When Lorena O'Neil interviewed Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-N.Y.) about her personal experience with deepfake porn and online sexual harassment (p. 34), she was surprised by the congresswoman's candor. "She's very willing to be open," the New Orleans-based journalist says. "She knows what needs to happen in order to make this change." Previously, in our September 2023 issue, O'Neil spotlighted a group of women warning about the dangers of AI.

Confronting History in the Deep South

Donovan X. Ramsay
Contributor

For "The Ghosts of Alabama" (p. 39), Donovan X. Ramsay visited the newly opened Freedom Monument Sculpture Park in Montgomery at the invitation of Bryan Stevenson, founder of the legal-aid nonprofit Equal Justice Initiative. While there, Ramsay confronted the ugly, personal history of slavery in the U.S. When it was time to write about what he'd found, he turned to music: "Beyoncé's 'Ameriican Requiem' has been the soundtrack to my writing of this piece."

FROM TOP, LEFT TO RIGHT: AIDAN ZAMIRI; COURTESY OF JOSEPH HUDAK; COURTESY OF LORENA O'NEIL; ANTONIO M. JOHNSON

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Opening Act

Cozy, Classic Pop

LAUFEY MAKES MUSIC that bridges generations, offering up lovesick modern-pop lyricism amid sounds that recall Ella Fitzgerald and Chet Baker. Fresh off a Best Traditional Pop Vocal Album win for her second LP, *Bewitched,* at the Grammys — "One of the best moments of my life," she says — the Icelandic Chinese multi-instrumentalist and singer is just getting started. "I have to live to write, it goes hand in hand," says Laufey, 25. She's at her most creative in a warm, comfortable environment: "It's all about having instruments that I connect with. I really need natural light as well, and I love having books around me." The songs she writes this way have rapidly given her a fiercely loyal fan base. "My songs are like my journals," she says. "And when other people relate to the music, I'm like, 'Oh, thank God I'm not alone.'" LEAH LU

Laufey rehearsing in Los Angeles in January

PHOTOGRAPH BY **Magnus Unnar** | 11

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The Mix

WHAT'S NEW, WHAT'S NEXT, WHAT'S NUTS

The Highs and Lows of Girl in Red

The super-relatable pop singer from Norway is ready for her close-up after touring with Taylor

PHOTOGRAPHS BY **Thea Traff**

GIRL IN RED

MARIE ULVEN is not a chill person. Over the course of lunch at a slick New York spot packed with women in expensive-looking black athleisure, she swings between aping Taylor Swift's arm flex on "The Man" from the Eras Tour – a move that Ulven, who opened for a few of those dates last summer, knows all about – and clutching her chest, breathless. "I'm just trying to deal with my anxiety when it comes," she says. "Right now, my heart really hurts."

Ulven's not having a heart attack, thank God. Sometimes, the Norwegian artist known as Girl in Red can just get a little overwhelmed. And with good reason. Today, no one at this swish eatery recognizes the young woman in the blue Ralph Lauren sweater and L.A. Dodgers cap, but with a Swift stadium tour under her belt and a new record, *I'm Doing It Again Baby!*, in the offing, that could very well be about to change. As her creative director and longtime friend Isak Jenssen tells me: "She switches between being the most confident person I know to being very insecure. At one point, she didn't think she had the biggest potential, like Taylor or Billie. But now, I think, she realizes she does."

Ulven, 25, has pretty much always taken music seriously – she's a true workhorse, like those superstars. The Oslo resident started writing songs when she was eight, playing guitar at 14, and has been producing her own music for a decade. After uploading her first song, the sad-and-sweet "I Wanna Be Your Girlfriend," to YouTube in 2018, things started moving very fast for the then-teen. She dropped two EPs in 2018 and 2019, followed by her debut album, *If I Could Make It Go Quiet*, in 2021. A poppy therapy session of a record that dealt with everything from macabre intrusive thoughts to the indignity of being a fuck buddy, the LP cemented Ulven's place in a weird-girl pop canon that includes the likes of Olivia Rodrigo and Gayle. She's relatable, but not cliché.

If three years seems a bit of a long time between albums for a budding artist, Ulven not only agrees with you, she's already worried about everything else she hasn't done yet: headlining her own arena tours, buying a midcentury pied-à-terre in Los Angeles, and, oh God, turning 30. "I need to learn to smell the fucking roses," she says, debating whether to just eat her Caesar salad with her hands – the giant leaves are unwieldy – or use a fork. Opting for the former, she adds: "I saw this TikTok about how we're the only species on the planet, humans, that are never satisfied. We set a goal and we really chase that fucking goal. And then we achieve it, and then we're like, 'What's next? What's next?' There's something really depressing about it."

In the end, Ulven went back to the studio when she was ready – when she had her fill of experiences to translate into music. "I'm inspired by paper and folders and fonts and light," she says, crunching into a crouton. "I'm inspired by espressos and traveling and trains. I'm inspired by waiters having etiquette. How he pours wine very nicely and lets you smell it first. I'm inspired by absolutely everything."

One big inspiration these days is her girlfriend, whom Ulven met at an Oslo bar in 2021 after deciding to just say yes to life instead of hiding on her couch. The night they met went on and on, Ulven says, culminating at the beach where they hung out under the stars with her dog. "Prior to meeting my girlfriend, I was very much convinced that I was unlovable, and I really hated myself," she says. "I never realized that it actually can really tear you down to be hating yourself so much." That experience is immortalized on her new album with the swoony "A Night to Remember," studded with lush keys that flutter like your heart does when you start falling in love.

As per usual, Ulven plays nearly every instrument on the album, which she recorded across a handful of European studios and her Oslo apartment. But this time, her signature brand of bedroom pop is polished to a high gloss that she's only slightly worried fans will find off-putting. "I feel like I'm a completely different person," she says. "So the music on this album, for me, doesn't sound so different from what I've done before. It just sounds like exactly what I'd make right now."

In her classic fashion, the album ping-pongs between highs and lows. Opener "I'm Back" creeps in almost bashfully, with Ulven proclaiming: "I'm back, I feel like myself/I was gone for a minute/'Cause I went to get help." The switch flips with "Doing It Again Baby," a bombastic strut of a song, and the first one she wrote for the record after compulsively picking out the melody during soundchecks. "That song is about feeling like I have so much self-esteem that I feel like I'm a cocky-ass bitch walking down the streets with my sunglasses on," she says.

Still, the bravado isn't a constant – single "Too Much" is about being just that (her mom was always telling her to quiet down), while tracks like "Phantom Pain" and "Pick Me" remind us that Ulven wasn't always so lucky in love. Sabrina Carpenter does help her go scorched-earth on an ex, though, on "You Need Me Now." The two singers both gained big new audiences last year as openers on separate legs of Swift's Eras Tour, but they've been friends since around 2022 – Ulven says they formed a mutual-appreciation society in each other's DMs before she asked Carpenter to guest on the dark rocker of a track for her new album.

"When she reached out to me, it felt like a no-brainer and I was immediately drawn to the record," Carpenter says. "It was exciting to make because it pushed me into new sonic territory."

Ulven is perhaps most herself on the ominous, echoey "Ugly Side," in which she grapples with feeling like Jeykll and Hyde – torn between being "cute" and "lovable" and "boiling inside."

In a lot of ways, she's always existing between dichotomies, whether that means feeling distinctly uncomfortable attending New York Fashion Week shows by hip designers like Tory Burch, Khaite, and Eckhaus Latta while she's in town ("I'm a very basic girl when it comes to clothes," she says) or proclaiming on her album's title track: "My big fat ego is making me say/This '99 vintage has impeccable taste!"

"I have these incredible highs, and then I have these very low lows," Ulven says as the waiter whisks away our plates. "Maybe that's good. I don't want to be just one thing. I don't want to be just this confident person who never doubts themselves. I think doubt can be great as much as it can be very paralyzing."

She pauses for a moment. "Yeah. I just need to chill the fuck out.... I think that's exactly what I need to do." There's a first time for everything. **BRENNA EHRLICH**

FAST FACTS

SWIFT THINKING
On the Eras Tour, Ulven says, she and Taylor Swift chatted about the challenges of making a second album and writing from perspectives other than your own.

ART POP
The cover of her new album is a massive sculpture that she commissioned in Oslo.

YES, CHEF
She's a big fan of *The Bear* and star Jeremy Allen White.

GROOMING BY MELISSA DEZARATE AT A-FRAME AGENCY USING KEVIN MURPHY AND DR. STURM. STYLING BY LUCY GASTON. PREVIOUS PAGE: JACKET BY SAINT LAURENT BY ANTHONY VACCARELLO. SHIRT BY ACNE STUDIOS. THIS PAGE: OUTFIT BY CELINE BY HEDI SLIMANE. JEANS BY ACNE STUDIOS. PHOTOGRAPHIC ASSISTANCE BY LIZIE BEN SHMUEL. STYLING ASSISTANCE BY NICHOLSON BAIRD.

ART

Portraits of Love, Glamour, and Joy

THOUSANDS OF rhinestones glisten across more than two decades' worth of art crafted by visual artist Mickalene Thomas. There's a richness and familiarity to those glimmering collage pieces, which appear among more than 80 works on display at the Broad in Los Angeles as part of the new show "Mickalene Thomas: All About Love." Drawing its name from the pivotal book by bell hooks, the touring exhibit celebrates the textures and contours of Black womanhood – like the rhinestones that adorn acrylic nails and the textile prints that swathe both clothes and furniture. "I often think of that particular way of inserting yourself, but also being seen not because you want to please others but because you want to feel good about yourself," Thomas says. "Those things are about this celebratory way of redefining and reshaping, amongst all of this chaos, [the fact] that we still love ourselves." Across the collection, Thomas places her art at the center of a conversation between sexuality, erotica, and memory. She asks complex questions about identity, digs into family history, and at times becomes the subject of her own work. "I prefer working with people that no one would recognize as a celebrity, so that anyone can see themselves in this person because she looks like ... their aunt, their sister, their cousin," Thomas says. In some works, she sees her own aunts getting glam for a night out. In others, she sees the version of herself that she envisioned growing into as a child. "It's using the inspiration from archival photographs – even if they're personal – as a point of entry to tell a story physically and creatively," she says. LARISHA PAUL

Thomas

◀ SELF-PORTRAIT

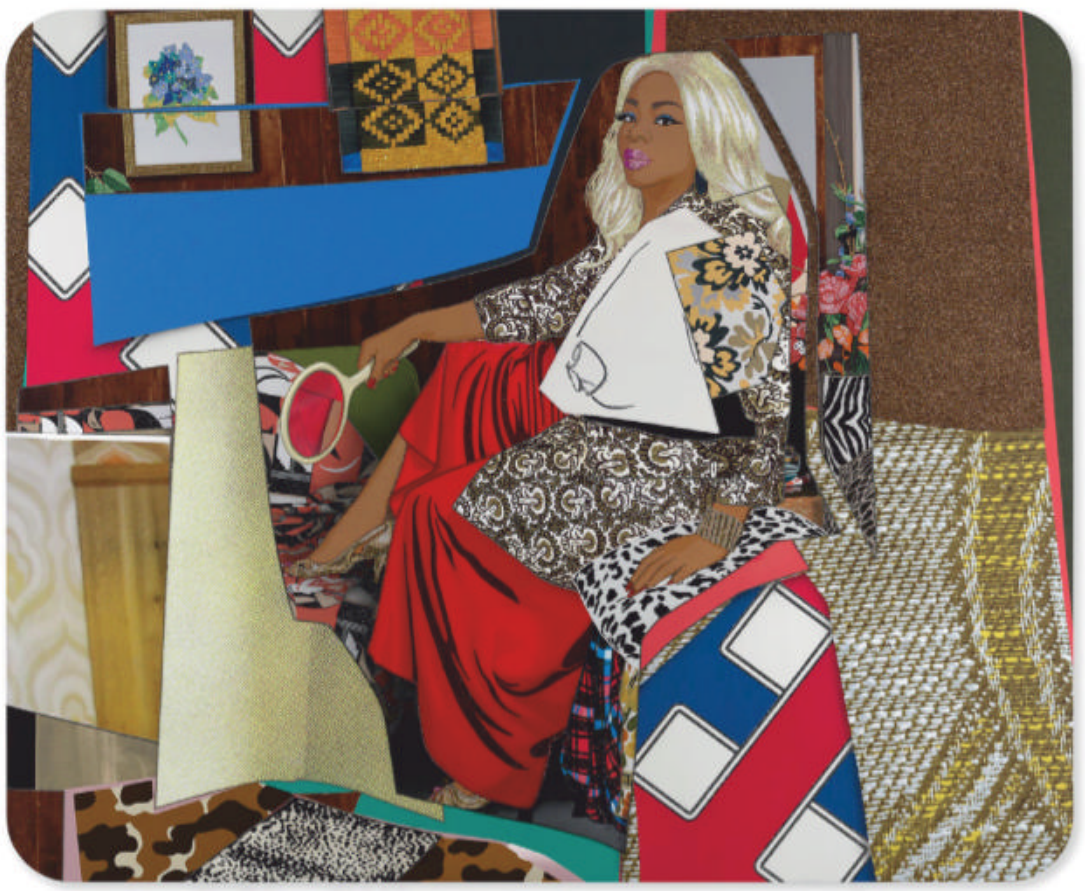
Thomas put herself in 2015's "Afro Goddess Looking Forward." "In order for me to ask other women to portray, recall, or embrace particular moments, I have to know what that feels like," she says. "The eyes are portraying this intensity of how we could just capture and hold the gaze."

▼ MIRROR, MIRROR

Thomas completed "Din Avec la Main Dans le Miroir et Jupe Rouge" in 2023, marking two decades of enshrining Black womanhood in her work. "I want my art to show how Black women show their sensuality, their desire," she says. "What does that look like?"

▼ PRIMAL ROAR

"This Is Where I Came In," from 2006, evokes deep growls and toe-curling hunger. "That was the main focus of thinking about the pattern as skin, or as a signifier for something that was feline or animalistic," Thomas says.



▲ MONET ON MY MIND

Thomas created "Monet's Salle a Manger Jaune" in 2012 after a residency at Claude Monet's estate in Giverny, France. By spending time in his space, she says, she recontextualized her own. "I started using [interiors] that were much more familiar — like my own homes — and putting in elements ... removing the sitter but still holding their presence," she says. "They're a representation of who we are, even though we're absent physically."

▼ ENIGMATIC GAZE

Thomas likens 2017's "Portrait of Maya #10," which includes silk-screened elements, to "The Mona Lisa." She notes that both ask the same question about their subjects: "Who is she, and what is her soul?"

FROM TOP, LEFT TO RIGHT: © MICKALENE THOMAS/COURTESY OF THE ARTIST; © MICKALENE THOMAS/MUGRABI COLLECTION; © MICKALENE THOMAS/COURTESY OF THE ARTIST; EMIL HOROWITZ; © MICKALENE THOMAS/BROOKLYN MUSEUM, A. AUGUSTUS HEALY FUND 2012.73A-B; © MICKALENE THOMAS/THE BROAD ART FOUNDATION, LOS ANGELES

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GETTING MESSY IN MUSIC CITY

WRITTEN BY
ALISON ABBEY HUDAK

Nashville may be known for country music and rowdy honky tonks, but its food scene is filled with tasty treasures. But be warned: These finger-licking favorites aren't for the faint of heart. Have your napkins ready and your wet wipes on standby, you're about to get down and dirty while dining out in Nashvegas.

PHOTOGRAPH BY **BELLIEVABLE PHOTOGRAPHY**

Prince's Hot Chicken

It's not a visit to Nashville without testing your taste buds on a basket of hot chicken. Be sure to hit up the original, Prince's Hot Chicken, serving the hottest stuff in town since 1945. This is greasy goodness in the very best way, with hot spices sticking to your fingers, your mouth and—if you do it right—your clothes. Whether you go safe with mild or dance with the devil and order the XXX Hot (not for the faint of heart—or gut), this local specialty is the gift that keeps on giving. Just remember not to touch your eyes.

@princeshotchicken_nashville princeshotchicken.com

PHOTOGRAPH BY **ELLISTON PLACE SODA SHOP**

Elliston Place Soda Shop

For nearly 90 years, Elliston Place Soda Shop has been a staple on Nashville's iconic Rock Block, home to some of the city's most historic music venues. A-list celebs have indulged in the shop's classic meat-and-three plates and soda fountain favorites for years, but it's the ooey, gooey pies of Ms. Linda Melton, aka The Pie Lady, that keep them coming back for more. Known for her mile-high merengues, she's been serving rockers and regulars a slice of over-the-top heaven since 1993.

@epsodashop ellistonplacessodashop.com

PHOTOGRAPH BY **MARTIN'S B-B-QUE-JOINT**

Martin's B-B-Que Joint

Music City is a BBQ town, and after almost 20 years of keeping Nashville fed, award-winning pitmaster Pat Martin has proven himself head and pork shoulders above the competition. At any of his six locations, you'll find spiced, saucy and sloppy meats and sides that will have you asking for seconds—and extra napkins. Go whole hog with a full slab of spareribs, and for the ultimate experience, order them half wet, half dry. One side packs a flavorful punch with Martin's signature sticky Memphis Dry Rub, while the other offers sweet sloppy heat by way of his Sweet Dixie sauce. Both are sure to linger under your fingernails for days to come. Believe us, it's well worth it.

@martinsbbq martinsbbqjoint.com

IT'S HUMAN NATURE
TO BITE OFF MORE
THAN YOU CAN CHEW.

IT'S IN OUR NATURE
TO HELP CLEAN IT UP.

Seventh
GENERATION
BIOBASED DEEP CLEAN
BIO-ENZYME POWER
FIGHTS STAINS
FRESH LAVENDER
SCENT
60

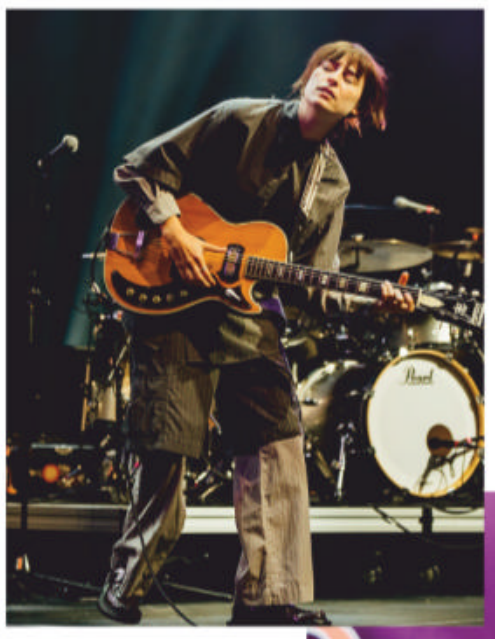
THAT'S THE
POWER OF
Seventh
GENERATION

SXSW 2024

‘Rolling Stone’ Brings the Party to Texas

THERE WAS NO HOTTER event at SXSW this year than Peso Pluma’s headlining set on the second night of ROLLING STONE’s Future of Music showcase. People lined up around multiple city blocks in Austin to see the música mexicana superstar – including one dedicated fan who was there at 4 a.m. the morning before the show and later got to meet his hero. Peso’s unforgettable performance was a highlight of our second annual showcase, which brought some of the coolest names in music to ACL Live at the Moody Theater over four nights in March. (Full disclosure: ROLLING STONE’s parent company, P-MRC, acquired a 50 percent stake in the SXSW festival in 2021.)

Peso Pluma



◀ FAYE WEBSTER

She’s quietly become a major live draw, and on the showcase’s guitar-heavy fourth night, Webster showed why with a performance full of sweet pedal-steel notes, funny yet relatable lyrics, potently chill indie grooves, and a few words in support of the Palestinian people.

▼ YOUNG MIKO

A few years ago, Young Miko was a promising artist to watch. Now, it feels like the world belongs to the super-charming Puerto Rican MC — and she brought the house down with a headliner-worthy performance right before Peso Pluma took the stage on night two.

▲ TEEZO TOUCHDOWN

The shape-shifting rap-rock star gave a fantastic performance on night one, including a story about the time he and some friends from his hometown of Beaumont, Texas, came to SXSW in 2018 and busked on the street.

▶ FLO MILLI

The unstoppable MC from Mobile, Alabama, was onstage firing off bar after bar on night three of our showcase at the moment when her long-awaited new album, *Fine Ho, Stay*, dropped. How’s that for a flex?

FROM RIGHT: SAMANTHA TELLEZ, 2; DUSANA RISOVIC, 2; SALIHAH SAADIQ

The New *Doctor Who* Is In!

How Ncuti Gatwa went from TV queer idol to making history on the iconic Brit sci-fi show

By ALAN SEPINWALL

THE FIRST THING you notice about Ncuti Gatwa is his smile. Whether as a young, anxious queer teen in Netflix's *Sex Education,* one of the many Kens in *Barbie,* the latest actor to play the lead character in *Doctor Who* – or even on a slightly pixelated Zoom screen – when Gatwa flashes those pearly whites, it is impossible to look at anything else. His expression radiates joy so pure and uncut it's as much a superpower as the Doctor's ability to travel through time or regenerate into new forms.

It's also exactly what *Doctor Who* producer Russell T. Davies was looking for when he began creating this 15th Doctor, long before Gatwa came in to audition. In 2005, Davies revived the British sci-fi TV institution from an extended limbo and ran the show for several seasons with Christopher Eccleston and David Tennant as the ninth and 10th Doctors, respectively. Upon taking the reins again last year, he decided that the present moment called for a different kind of Doctor.

"I was thinking about what a terrible world it is now, and how many stresses of mental health there are in young people," says Davies. "I wanted a hero who wasn't closed, who wasn't all stiff upper lip. And [who] wasn't swaggering or butch, either. The life of a young person is bigger and madder and wilder than it was when I was young. So I wanted a hero who *felt* more. Then along comes Ncuti, and bless you, you could not hide your emotions for a second in your performances."

The emotions of Gatwa's Doctor are indeed always palpable. His first appearance, in the Christmas 2023 special, begins with his Doctor crying in a tight close-up; when his new companion Ruby Sunday (Millie Gibson) sees him for the first time, he is exuberantly dancing in a club, wearing a tight tank top and kilt. The delight Gatwa projects onscreen is also a reflection of how it feels to take on a character who may be second only to James Bond in British pop-cultural identity.

PHOTOGRAPH BY **William Arcand**

The new Doctor, inside the TARDIS

"The show evolves and regenerates. For all you damners out there, I'm not going anywhere."

"I don't know whether you can quite put it in words," Gatwa says. "They are a character that we've grown up knowing and that most people in this country have had the show passed down to from someone. It's like your favorite piece of furniture in your house. It's something that you've always known and loved to be there, and then you're going to pass it on to someone else. It feels really cool."

It's a huge leap in visibility for Gatwa, 31, whose family moved to Scotland when he was two to escape the Rwandan genocide. He struggled with racism and loneliness while growing up in a foreign land. He was on the verge of quitting acting due to a lack of money when he landed his breakthrough job on *Sex Education,* in which his character Eric Effiong's journey toward embracing his sexuality and finding a place within both his religious family and his church instantly made him an icon for queer teens. (He had 500 Instagram followers right before the show debuted; he has nearly 3 million now.) Naturally baby-faced, he sports a thick leading-man mustache most of the time to look older. He shaved it to play Eric, then had to wear a false one for his first two months of portraying the Doctor.

Though *Doctor Who* debuted back in 1963, Disney+ is presenting Gatwa's inaugural series of adventures (premiering May 10) as Season One, akin to the periodic fresh starts the franchise has taken. Perhaps the freshest start of all is that Gatwa is the first Black actor to play the Doctor, which will be a big change for legacy viewers – though not necessarily for children in the series' target demographic.

"If you're a six-year-old boy sitting there in Brixton, it's like, '*That's* the Doctor,' " argues Davies. "If they go online, they're finding the spiciest chicken wing on YouTube. They're not bothered by this."

Still, Davies understands the necessity of hiring an actor of color to play this iconic role. "It's about time," he says. "Sometimes, big old terrestrial and streaming shows can be slow machines to catch up with the world."

"That's what the show does," agrees Gatwa. "It evolves and it regenerates. I feel like it's about time, and I am here. For all you damners out there, I'm not going anywhere."

Gatwa is also openly queer. So is Davies, who has spent much of his career telling LGBTQ+ stories, like the original *Queer as Folk*. He says *Doctor Who* auditioned performers of every race, gender identity, and sexual identity before Gatwa was chosen, and that this feels less momentous to him and his new star than it may to viewers.

"I don't walk around thinking all day about being queer, and what's my queer energy today," says Davies. "You're talking to people who live a queer life. So this is completely normal. And where I'm slightly amazed is that anyone finds this different. Come on straight people, come and find out!"

Gatwa, shining on *Sex Education*

"I am reluctant to apply any human label to the Doctor," says Gatwa, "because they're an alien. They've been with all sorts. That is label-less and limitless, and I think it represents our ability to be anything. That character can be anyone and played by anyone. And I feel very, very honored that I get to be the first of a couple of things. If you're a true fan of the show, you understand that the show lends itself to inclusivity and to diversity and welcoming different people in. That's what Russell has done. I'm very happy to be a part of that vision."

Doctor Who has always been socially progressive, but the commentary this time around seems even more pointed than Davies' last stint. A recent special gave beloved *Doctor Who* character Donna Noble a nonbinary child, whom she fiercely defended against transphobes, while the Season One premiere functions as a metaphor for governments that try to control reproductive rights without worrying about what happens to children after they're born.

"If you're not writing that [in 2024], what on Earth are you doing?" argues Davies. "I think our rights are in danger. So there's no choice in this. There's things to be done, there's things to be said. And if the most exciting and entertaining action-adventure show on television can also do that, I think that's wonderful." (Gatwa responds to this speech with an exaggerated snap, cracking up both men.)

Into this fragile moment steps Gatwa, who was 12 when the Davies revival began. "It just felt so cool that this was a show that we had on British TV and it was fantastical, and that we had this mad adventure once a week," he recalls. Tennant was the Doctor he grew up on, and he credits Tennant's Hamlet for the Royal Shakespeare Company as the reason he studied drama at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland: "That DVD formed my perception of what a true actor is," he says. While sharing scenes with Tennant in one of the specials, he says, "I felt like I was in *Inception*. It was just like a dream in a dream. For me to have generated from my Doctor, who also is the man that inspired me? Then he introduced me to the TARDIS for the first time, and it was like, the universe is doing some great magics here."

Tennant and Jodie Whittaker (the first female Doctor, a milestone that came with its own baggage) both warned him that however big a deal Gatwa thought being the Doctor was, it's much, much bigger.

"[Tennant] prepared me for the intensity of the show," he says, "which I had been downplaying: 'Yes, I understand that it's a huge show, but I don't think it's going to be that big news, really.' And then it bloody well was. I thought, 'Oh, my gosh.' "

Sex Education launched his career, but playing an iconic character with a massive fan base comes with a lot of responsibility. Asked about one point of similarity between the Doctor and Eric, he hesitates, makes sure to note during a lengthy answer that Eric was a child while the Doctor is thousands of years old, then emphatically jokes, "Eric is gone. Just to let everyone know, Eric is gone. He's dead! He's not here anymore. It's all about the Doctor now!"

Davies, older and more PR-savvy, warns him, "The headline for this will now be, 'Eric Is Dead!' " An unfazed Gatwa flashes one more dazzling smile and replies, " 'And the Doctor lives.' Let that be the headline." ®

JAMES PARDON/BAD WOLF/BBC STUDIOS; SAMUEL TAYLOR/NETFLIX

PROFILE

How Hannah Einbinder *Hacks* It in the Comedy World

She grew up with a 'Saturday Night Live' great, but the actress doesn't take her recent success for granted

By KASE WICKMAN

SANDY HONIG

YOU WOULD BE FORGIVEN FOR mistaking Hannah Einbinder for Ava Daniels, the character she plays on HBO's *Hacks*. The actor shares certain similarities with the comedy writer she's portrayed for two seasons now, like their dry delivery, which leaves you less than 100 percent sure of whether they're fucking with you until they crack a smirk and let you in on the joke. That's not all, though.

"We're both the same age, and we have the same face and body, of course," Einbinder shares. "She looks exactly like me. That's some *Inside the Actors Studio* stuff, a look behind the curtain."

See also: Dry delivery.

But really, Einbinder, 28, found widespread recognition (including twin Outstanding Supporting Actress Emmy nominations) in her mid-twenties with *Hacks,* the same age that Ava is while finding her groove as a writing partner to comedian Deborah Vance (played by Jean Smart, who has her own pair of Best Actress statues for the show), an elder stateswoman of comedy struggling to stay both relevant and creatively fulfilled in the time of TikTok. Einbinder has her own comedic legacy influence in her life: Her mother, Laraine Newman, was part of the original cast of a little-known variety show called *Saturday Night Live* in 1975.

Yes, Ava walks and talks like Einbinder, with the actor saying that "as time has gone on, I've imbued her with my affect," but "there are just as many fundamental differences" between them. For one thing, Ava is a Virgo. Einbinder? "Classic Gemini."

Season Three of *Hacks* continues the ongoing rom-com (no happily ever after guaranteed) between Ava and Deborah. They say that if you really love something, you should set it free, which is exactly what Deborah was going for when she fired Ava in the Season Two finale after the pair pulled off a coup with Deborah's self-financed stand-up comeback special.

"She knows Deborah is running away from stability," Einbinder says. "Pushing Ava away because she's scared."

A year later in the show's timeline, Ava and Deborah are estranged. They're professionally successful, if a little bored, and Ava is playing house with her girlfriend, preoccupied with the minutiae of TripAdvisor ratings for a vacation she wants to go on while the show she writes for is on hiatus; and Deborah can't be bothered to show up for the unveiling of a slot machine with her face on it. Things are ... fine.

"Of course that only lasts so long, and Ava blows it up to return to Deborah," Einbinder says, arid. Part of that blowing up of Ava's life also leads to whatever was going on in those set photos of Einbinder getting hot and heavy with guest star Christina Hendricks, which set the internet ablaze. Einbinder declined to share many spoilery details, but she says she's looking forward to the audience's reaction to that episode. Things get so steamy that perhaps it'll get ... sweaty?

"'You're funny, but that doesn't always yield results,'" my mom said. "Nothing is guaranteed."

"Things on *Hacks,* when it comes to the hot and heavy, it's only hot and heavy for so long, and then the comedy slides in," she says. "The scene is explosive, of course, on that level, but also it's really fucking funny and so outrageous and insane."

Though she's the daughter of a comedy great, who will be portrayed in the upcoming movie *SNL 1975* by Emily Fairn, Einbinder says she's most benefited from her mom's hindsight. Newman was 23 when *SNL* premiered, not too far off from Einbinder's age when she snagged the co-lead in *Hacks*. However, "my mom was a drug addict and kind of on her own in the world" when *SNL* came a-calling. "She didn't really have a solid support system, and *SNL* is a famously chaotic place," Einbinder says. "So I have certainly benefited from her sober wisdom about those early days."

And that sad-clown trope exists for a reason: You've gotta laugh to keep from crying, and sometimes the business of comedy is anything but a barrel of laughs. Einbinder takes her professional and personal growth seriously: She watches herself on episodes of *Hacks* "like a football player watching game tape" and reads self-help books to learn, in her words, "how to be not shitty." She has a leg up in the comedy world, but she's not skipping days at the gym, so to speak.

"At one point, I asked her if she thought I could do it," Einbinder says of following in her mom's footsteps. "And she said, 'Nothing is guaranteed. I think you're funny, but that doesn't always yield results.' She never really blew smoke about the reality of this."

And that message, as we watch Einbinder, as Ava, stumble and recover, is never more clear than in *Hacks*.

IN THE BLACK

The Amy Winehouse Business Is Booming

Thirteen years after the retro-soul singer's death, tribute bands, album reissues, and a new biopic are keeping her rebel spirit alive

By DAVID BROWNE

AS ANTHONY D'AMATO PREPS backstage at Sony Hall in midtown Manhattan, it's hard not to notice his six-foot height, horn-rimmed glasses – and the name "Amy" in large black letters on the side of his head. It's not a tattoo, just black liquid eyeliner easy to wash off, but it suits the occasion. In a few minutes, the New Jerseyan and his 12-piece band will walk onstage, take their places beneath an LED sign lit up with Amy Winehouse's first name and a simulation of her signature beehive, and play her *Back to Black* album start to finish – and hardly for the first time, either. "I really never imagined that it would become something that I would have done maybe 200 times at this point," says D'Amato, who uses the stage name Remember Jones. "My queer friends, all people of color, my mom – everybody knew who Amy Winehouse was."

In July 2011, Winehouse was found dead of alcohol poisoning at her home in the Camden neighborhood in London. She left behind a mere two albums (including the 2006 retro-pop classic *Back to Black*) and a checkered personal life plagued by addiction, marriage, divorce, and a million paparazzi photos documenting it all. In the years since, her musical and cultural influence have only grown. Lana Del Rey, Adele, Lady Gaga, and Future have all cited her as an influence; Miley Cyrus and Måneskin have covered her songs onstage. D'Amato's show is merely one of many tribute acts working around the world, from the U.S. and the U.K. to Serbia and Slovenia, many featuring Winehouse lookalike singers sporting her trademark hairstyle, winged eyeliner, pumps, and miniskirts.

Fans can make a pilgrimage to Camden to see a life-size bronze statue of Winehouse erected in her honor in 2014. (Early this year, to protest Israel's attacks in Gaza,

MAX VADUKUL/AUGUST; DEAN ROGERS/FOCUS FEATURES

someone covered the Star of David necklace on the statue with a sticker of a Palestinian flag.) For $135,000, Winehouse die-hards – who call themselves either Winettes or Cherries (after her song "Cherry") – could even own the nearly 230 books in her personal library. A few years ago, the Washington, D.C., rare-books dealer Type Punch Matrix bought the collection at a charity auction organized by Winehouse's family and is now offering it for sale. The collection includes books on her hero Frank Sinatra, Jackie Collins novels, bios of musicians who battled addiction (Anthony Kiedis, Jimi Hendrix), a copy of Allen Ginsberg's *Howl* with an unfinished lyric tucked inside, and certain volumes with obvious wear and tear. "It's pretty clear she was reading some of these in the bathtub, or lighting candles in her apartment and these were under them," says Type Punch Matrix co-owner Brian Cassidy. "The condition helps tell the story and speaks to the life." One book sports a lipstick kiss. "I can't prove it's Amy's," Cassidy says, "but I'm pretty sure."

At the same time, the musical-industrial complex around Winehouse has expanded. Her legacy now includes more than a dozen reissues, compilations, live recordings, and documentaries. This year, the reissue of her 2003 debut, *Frank*, will be commemorated with a new edition and video for "In My Bed." Arriving this month is *Back to Black*, a biopic directed by Sam Taylor-Johnson (who also helmed the John Lennon biopic *Nowhere Boy*). During filming, the director herself noticed Winehouse's ubiquity. "You walk into a restaurant, she's singing," Taylor-Johnson says. "You walk around the corner, there's a mural. You walk into a shop, there's a poster. You see people with a T-shirt or a scarf. It feels everywhere all the time."

When Winehouse died, much was made of her age – 27, the same as Kurt Cobain, Jim Morrison, Jimi Hendrix, and others in the so-called "27 Club." At the time, comparisons to those rock legends felt a little premature, but 13 years after her death, they've been proven true. One of the first major pop stars of the millennium, Winehouse is now the equivalent of a Cobain or Morrison for the generation who came of age with pop in this century, and with a fan base and industry to match. "She's in the same breath, not just biographically but artistically," says Cassidy. "There's tragedy there, but also a lot of joy and creativity. There's something very archetypal about her life."

As her former bass player Dale Davis says, "You get these people who come along once a generation and just change everything up completely. So it doesn't surprise me in the slightest that interest is still there. It's a short career, like Cobain, but the impact is massive, isn't it?"

When trying to pinpoint the moment that the posthumous Winehouse industry kicked into gear, all roads point to *Amy*, director Asif Kapadia's 2015 documentary. The film made $23 million worldwide, an exceptional number for a doc of any sort, and won the Oscar for best documentary. "There was interest right after that," says Sony Music Publishing executive Chris Jones, who oversees the licensing of her songs.

Soon after the film, Davis was approached about reuniting Winehouse's touring band behind an Amy-style frontperson. Originally called Forever Amy and since renamed the Amy Winehouse Band, the U.K.-based tribute show re-creates a standard Winehouse set list. "If we're going to give people the feeling of how it was," Davis says, "I thought it was easier to stick to an original show and have the same format."

Davis, who admits he had concerns about the idea, says he experienced an unsettling moment during one of the group's early shows in 2016, when an Italian singer was performing as Winehouse. "My bass guitar wouldn't stay in tune for the whole night," he says. "At that point, I thought Amy was trying to tell me something." But after seeing emotional fans at shows and hearing from another that their mother was dying – and attended the show so she could have a Winehouse experience before she passed – Davis reconciled with his decision. Save for a period during the pandemic, the Amy Winehouse Band has been working ever since. Davis also says that Amy's father, Mitch Winehouse (who declined comment for this story), saw a show and gave his blessing: "He found it very emotional."

Both the Winehouse Band and D'Amato's "Back to Back to Black" shows purposefully avoid lead singers who replicate Winehouse's look; the Winehouse Band's current frontperson, Bronte Shande, sports neither beehive nor Amy-style makeup. "I want someone to have the spirit of Amy like Bronte does," Davis says. "I've worked with the original Amy. I don't need to work with someone who looks like her." D'Amato, whose show features both him and several different male and female singers, also has mixed feelings about lookalike acts. "I don't knock it, but some of them are just not great," he says. "The singer can't quite sing it or doesn't pull off the thing. You can't really try to copy Amy."

I TOLD YOU I WAS TROUBLE Abela as Winehouse in *Back to Black*.

"You get these people who come along once a generation and just change everything up completely. The impact is massive, isn't it?"

Not every Winehouse-related project has panned out. A hologram tour, in which Davis and her old band would have accompanied a simulated Winehouse, was announced in 2018 but fell through for reasons that remain unclear. But overall, the business of Winehouse appears to be in healthy shape. According to one industry source, her publishing catalog is likely valued at nearly 20 times its annual earnings (on the high end of such evaluations). Last year, Openville Ltd., the private company directed by her divorced parents, Mitch and Janis, that oversees that business, had equity of about $2 million. According to Royalty Exchange, which allows investors to buy shares of royalties of select songs, Winehouse's catalog is "highlighted by consistent, still-growing earnings" and is "above the 75th percentile of all catalogs analyzed by Royalty Exchange." Last year, the video for "Back to Black" vaulted past 1 billion views on YouTube, 17 years after its release.

The Winehouse windfall is sure to spike with the release of *Back to Black*, which stars British actress Marisa Abela and traces Winehouse's life from her teen years through her death. "Interest has been steady over the last five, six years," says Jones. "I think the forthcoming film will boost that significantly." Rockabilia, the online store that sells officially licensed music merch, is predicting a surge in its Winehouse T-shirt sales. "We've definitely seen an uptick in Bob Marley with the movie that just came out," says co-owner Frankie Blydenburgh. "I think Amy will pick up for sure."

During the filming of *Back to Black*, photos of Abela as Winehouse made their way around the internet, much to the displeasure of some Winehouse fans. "It's a fucking sick joke – Amy would be pissed off at this shit," wrote a fan in a typical sentiment. Davis witnessed the outcry for himself. "I've had people who are supposedly friends of mine on my Instagram feed saying, 'Let's make a petition to stop the film,' " he says. "It's so fresh in people's minds, and they have a lot of opinions." Adds Taylor-Johnson, "You're like, 'You're judging an entire movie on one picture.' I think people are nervous, and all I can say is I treated her with reverence, respect, and everything she deserved."

The fervency of Winehouse's fan base may recall that of past rock legends, but it also brings with it a new twist. Her breakthrough coincided with the rise of social media, and the way her life was so publicly on display connected with members of a generation who've lived their lives on social media as well. "Seeing her and some of her struggles, some people identify with it instead of sensationalizing it," says D'Amato. "They think, 'She's more like me.' "

After his band's 90-minute show, which included favorites like "Valerie" and "Fuck Me Pumps," D'Amato was approached by a fan with a Winehouse tattoo on her arm. "This happens pretty often," he says later. "I always thought I should be taking a photo with the people who show me their tattoos. To put Amy on your skin, it's got to connect to you in a deep way."

Q&A

Omar Apollo

The Mexican American star on befriending SZA, jamming out to Beyoncé, and making music for arenas

BY TOMÁS MIER

OMAR APOLLO IS looking at himself through Zoom as he tries on the beige Sherpa jacket he just bought. "You fuck with it?" he asks.

It's hard not to fuck with everything the Mexican American alt-R&B star does. Apollo dropped his debut album, *Ivory,* in April 2022, blew up with its ultra-sentimental song "Evergreen," and followed that success by touring with SZA last year. Recently, he's been dipping into fashion. (A massive billboard of him dripped in the luxury designer Loewe looms over Sunset Boulevard in L.A.)

Apollo is back in L.A. these days, putting the finishing touches on his upcoming album, out in the summer. He's experimenting with jazz, house, and other genres, and he tells me it's the best music he's ever made. And, nah, he's not just saying that.

How are you?
I'm good. I've been posted up, finishing the album. We're mixing, and I'm really excited. How are you?

Good. I just got back from visiting family in Durango, Mexico.
Duranguense! I know the dance. You're supposed to act like you got a penny stuck in between your cheeks or something.

Your knees.
Oh, your knees? I remember my mom would teach me how to do that. I was in *baile folklórico* when I was younger. It was zapateado and dances like that. The girls had the little clicks in their hands and the big dresses. The guys would have sombreros and mariachi-looking pants.

How are you feeling about this new album? I read that you are angrier on it.
Angrier, definitely, on the single "Spite." Now it's back to my old longing-for-love vibe, but it's reimagined. I got in with Teo Halm. He's been my friend since I was 17 years old. We met when I worked at Guitar Center.

We reconnected on "Evergreen." We flew to London for two or three months last year. It was really no breaks. It was cool to get into that state of mind where everything is about making music we both love and connect to. The album doesn't feel like it's a bunch of songs put together. It's a sequence that is made to be listened to front to back.

There's one house-infused song that feels like it came from left field.
I was trying to paint an image. I want to be able to set a scene the way that a film would. I wanted something people could just be at the club with, because when you think of my music, you don't think about the club. So I'm like, "Fuck, I need some club shit." But it was just how I was feeling at the time, in London especially. I was going to so many parties.

Who were some of your inspirations on here?
It was, like, Kate Bush, Giorgio Moroder, Labi Siffre. Let me pull out the playlist: Daniel Johnston, he's sick. Jeff Buckley, Lana Del Rey, for sure. I've also been listening to a lot of Beyoncé.

Which album?
4. That album's insane.

You have your Disha Hot sauce going to Taco Bell.
My mom made the hot sauce recipe. I wanted to do a relaunch of my hot sauce, but I had to make *Ivory*. I was like, "Fuck, I have to put this aside for now and focus on the music." The hot sauce packets will be in every Taco Bell in America. It feels good because she crossed the border from Mexico and opened up a restaurant. When I was born, it became too much, so she had to shut it down. This was the hot sauce she used in the restaurant, so it's me being like, "Since I made you get the restaurant shut down by being born, this is how I'm paying you back."

What kind of food would your mom make?
She would make tortas ahogadas, chiles rellenos, aguachile. She made a lot of shit. She was so good at it, I'm not going to lie. That just made my mouth water.

The first time we spoke was two years ago, before the success of "Evergreen." How are you handling the fame that came at you pretty quickly?
It was weird at first. The things I'd say on the internet would come up in interviews. I'd be like, "Damn, people remember that? That was a tiny thought that I had." By the time "Evergreen" blew up, I already had the infrastructure that I needed to maintain, so it wasn't like, "Oh, what do we do now?" I had already done eight world tours. I was selling out venues, but it reached a way different level.

In L.A., you went from the Shrine to opening for SZA at the Forum.
When I played the Shrine, which was like 5,000 people, "Evergreen" hadn't blown up yet, so I was like, "Damn, I feel successful." After that show, I remember feeling like, "I want to triple this." And then the SZA tour happened, and I was like, "Fuck." I had to focus because that was an entire crowd of people who just didn't know me. It was scary. After the arena tour, that's when I figured out how I wanted to make music. I was like, "Oh, I want to make music for arenas."

Did you develop a friendship with SZA on tour?
Yeah, I did. On the road, it was super busy, but she's super sweet. We were at dinner a couple of months ago, and then I saw her at the Drake show. I was so drunk [*laughs*]. She's always showing love.

PHOTOGRAPH BY Joshua White

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COUNTRY'S NEW COWBOY ERA

The Red Dirt scene is exploding with stars like Kaitlin Butts, Beyoncé's leading a cowboy-core revolution, and country songwriters are wrangling tough topics like opioids

Kaitlin Butts

The Red Dirt music of Texas and Oklahoma is booming right now. A theater kid from Tulsa wants to bring it to the masses. *By* Marissa R. Moss

KAITLIN BUTTS is sitting in an East Nashville coffee shop, wondering if she should tell Vince Gill that "Come Rest Your Head (On My Pillow)," their romantic duet from her new album, *Roadrunner!*, was actually inspired by a woman in a funny but slightly crude tank top.

"It had 'cowboy pillows' written across her chest," she says, laughing. Butts had been wandering around after her set at the Two Step Festival in Texas when she spotted the shirt. She jotted down the phrase "cowboy pillows" in her phone, and eventually worked up a tender love song about a woman providing comfort (or a soft place to rest) to a man. She thinks Gill would appreciate the backstory: They're both from Oklahoma and born of a songwriting tradition that, as she puts it, embraces "an unrefined edge" and a little real-life humor.

"It's something I have never been able to put my finger on," Butts says, cross-legged on a

KAITLIN BUTTS

couch, in black leggings and running shoes. "But I can feel an Oklahoma artist when I'm listening to one."

Though she's a new name to many, Butts is establishing herself as one of the most dynamic artists to grow out of the Oklahoma Red Dirt scene, unafraid to test boundaries for which the regional (and male-dominated) subgenre is known. Her 2022 sophomore album found her fiercely fighting for a reclamation of power for her characters and herself, wading through domestic violence, addiction, and family trauma. Since then, she's covered Kesha's "Hunt You Down," released a disco remix of Shania Twain's "That Don't Impress Me Much," made a music video with a drag queen, and created *Roadrunner!,* out this summer, which is a modern redo of Butts' favorite musical, *Oklahoma!*.

Butts may still exude Oklahoma, but she's lived in Nashville since 2019 with her husband, Cleto Cordero, frontman of the Texas-bred band Flatland Cavalry. It's a rare instance when they're both off the road, which means days on the couch and nights at a local lesbian bar for karaoke. *Roadrunner!* lets Butts lean into the theatricality she's always sprinkled into her persona and live show, where the costumes are fringed and her voice fills the room on even the gloomiest songs.

That theatricality, though, is everything the Red Dirt genre isn't typically known for. Generally referring to the songwriting scene that grew out of Stillwater, Oklahoma, in the Seventies and which now encompasses a certain kind of roots, country, and rock amalgam that includes pioneers like Bob Childers and Cross Canadian Ragweed, it's also getting a national platform. Oklahoma boy Zach Bryan sells out stadiums, while bands like Turnpike Troubadours are crossing state lines into the mainstream. "It's cool to see these artists have a bigger moment," says Butts, poised to be next in line.

Dierks Bentley, with whom Butts is touring this summer, agrees. "When I first started out, I spent a lot of time touring with artists in the Red Dirt scene," Bentley says. "They have a spirit and passion for authentic storytelling that rivals anyone out there. Kaitlin fits right in. I love her voice, and her lyrics are raw and honest."

Butts has always checked as many Red Dirt boxes as she's defied. She was born in Tulsa, but didn't grow up listening to country music. She drove a Lexus, not a truck. And she was a supremely gifted musical-theater kid, who went to see a local production of *Oklahoma!* every summer.

"There's so much shared between country and musical theater," Butts says. "There's great songwriting, there's emotion, there's humor, there's witty one-liners. There's murder! All those things have made me the performer I am."

BUTTS WENT to Oklahoma City's Academy of Contemporary Music as the only country-focused artist in her class, so the school sent her to gigs in Stillwater. Acclimating herself to the historic scene was a steep learning curve. "I had no idea about the Red Dirt community," she says. She remembers turning to her mother to help fill in the blanks. "She told me about Mike McClure and Randy Crouch and Stoney LaRue."

Butts released her first album, *Same Hell, Different Devil,* in 2015, and then took a seven-year pause before *What Else Can She Do*. The album was heartbreaking and serious, but never without sly humor or theatrical flourish. For the title track's video, which dropped just before legislation aimed at criminalizing drag was proposed in Tennessee, Butts cast drag queen Paris Van Cartier. She wasn't trying to make it political, but she didn't mind if anyone thought that. Butts grew up around the queer community: Her acting and tap teachers were a married gay couple. "It's been normal since I was five years old," she says.

"I think we're in a different age now," Butts adds. "And when someone doesn't believe in the core principles of who I am, which is really that we're all equal human beings, then you can see yourself out the door."

Roadrunner! is sure to widen her platform. While not a song-by-song response to *Oklahoma!,* the album flips the classic tale into one where the women are "liberated and hitting on guys" instead of waiting for their attention. Her version of Kesha's "Hunt You Down" fits right in. Plus, "[Kesha] is so frickin' country," Butts says.

Covering Kesha was also the perfect way to appeal to new crowds. This summer, Butts is playing Lollapalooza, and she's not worried about whether her music stays neatly in a Red Dirt box. Like the soil it's named for, she views the genre as a place to bloom from instead of being endlessly rooted.

"I don't ever want to be the kind of artist where people can nail me down," Butts says. "Red Dirt is where I learned the basics of storytelling. But I want to be unpredictable." ®

RED DIRT: THE NEXT GENERATION

In his 2020 book *Red Dirt: Roots Music Born in Oklahoma, Raised in Texas, at Home Anywhere*, author (and ROLLING STONE contributor) Josh Crutchmer pinpoints the 1979 release of Oklahoma musician Bob Childers' debut album as the birth of the Red Dirt movement. Here are four artists stoking the flame that Childers lit.

Dylan Gossett

HOMETOWN Austin

THE BACKSTORY The 25-year-old emerged from nowhere last summer with a pair of bare-bones songs — "To Be Free" and "Coal" — that reminded everyone of the power of a well-written lyric delivered without affectation. He also caught the ear of Miranda Lambert, who signed Gossett as the first artist on her Big Loud Texas imprint. In March, he mesmerized fans at *Rolling Stone*'s Future of Music SXSW showcase and dropped his second EP a week later.

LISTEN UP "Somewhere Between" beefs up Gossett's sound with drums, while he paints a picture of a restless soul's train-hopping journey across the U.S.

Kat Hasty

HOMETOWN San Angelo, Texas

THE BACKSTORY A Lone Star State wanderer, Hasty moved all about West Texas, picking up ideas for her sharp songs along the way. She writes about everything from self-esteem to heartache, killing sacred cows in equal measure. "I'm never gonna be your southern Texas wannabe beauty queen," she snarls in "Pretty Things."

LISTEN UP Hasty's forthcoming single, "The Time of Your Life," is a wicked kiss-off in which she tells her ex, in vivid detail, how she's "kissing boys that I don't like, hanging out with folks that drink all night."

Koe Wetzel

HOMETOWN Pittsburg, Texas

THE BACKSTORY Wetzel's 2016 album, *Noise Complaint,* mixed country with hip-hop and grunge, and promptly made him a cult artist. But don't equate cult with small: The imposing Texan plays to massive crowds throughout the Red Dirt region, drawn to his true tales of drunken escapades and more than one night spent in jail. Expect Wetzel's base to only grow when he drops his latest album, *9 Lives,* in July.

LISTEN UP Wetzel's new single, "Damn Near Normal," is his take on Bob Seger's "Turn the Page," only darker. (But no Wetzel primer is complete without the notorious "February 28, 2016.")

Southall

HOMETOWN Stillwater, Oklahoma

THE BACKSTORY Read Southall and his six-piece band may have come up in the birthplace of Red Dirt — Stillwater, Oklahoma — but that didn't stop them from taking risks with the genre. On last year's self-titled album, they added heavy-metal riffing to their blue-collar anthems about the struggle to stay afloat.

LISTEN UP "Scared Money" is Southall's most straightahead rocker, but try the searing "Out Alive" for a taste of their experimentalism. **JOSEPH HUDAK**

PREVIOUS SPREAD: THOMAS CRABTREE. THIS PAGE FROM TOP: WILLIAM BASNETT; AXEL MARCENARO; GABE MUNIZ; DALTON LATHAM

Opioids Came for Country Music. It's Fighting Back

With fentanyl and pills flooding communities at the heart of the genre, artists such as Brad Paisley, Elvie Shane, Jaime Wyatt, and others are meeting the crisis in song and in action. *By* Jeff Gage

PHOTOGRAPHS IN ILLUSTRATION BY JODY DOMINGUE; DANIELLE DEL VALLE/GETTY IMAGES; JOSEPH OKPAKO/WIREIMAGE

DRUGS NEVER SEEMED like a problem to Elvie Shane. Dabbling in cocaine, meth, and heroin were all part of the future country singer's college days in Bowling Green, Kentucky. Even when he got hooked on speed, the dangers didn't seem real.

"We just thought we were having fun and catching a buzz," says Shane. "It wasn't until I started seeing my friends drop like flies that I realized we were playing with fire."

That was before the opioid crisis ravaged Shane's home state of Kentucky and small towns across the U.S., like the one where he grew up: Caneyville, population just more than 500. "Hard drugs were a big-city problem," Shane recalls. "The word 'overdose' was very, very rare."

Today, drug overdoses kill more than 100,000 people annually in this country, with fentanyl, a synthetic opioid, touted as the leading cause of death for people 18 to 45. Those figures led Shane to come clean about his drug abuse on the 2023 single "Pill," one of three songs from his new album, *Damascus,* that address the crisis.

"Those songs are for the people that have been there," says Shane, who got clean for around a decade before scoring a country Number One with "My Boy" in 2021. "So, if you hear the words in my songs, you know I've fucking been there too."

He's not alone in the country world in opening up about addiction. Grammy-nominated singer Jelly Roll explored his past as a drug user and dealer in songs like "Save Me" and in the Hulu doc of the same name. He's played prisons and recovery centers, and in January, went before Congress in support of anti-fentanyl legislation.

"I was a part of the problem. I am here now, standing as a man that wants to be a part of the solution," Jelly Roll testified. "I was the uneducated man in the kitchen playing chemist with drugs I knew absolutely nothing about, just like these drug dealers are doing right now when they're mixing every drug on the market with fentanyl – and they're killing the people we love."

Brad Paisley saw the impact of the opioid crisis firsthand when he spoke with victims from his home state of West Virginia, where overdose deaths per capita are among the worst in the world. The singer, whose "The Medicine Will" is a blistering takedown of pharmaceutical firms, lays the blame at the feet of drug-company executives.

"They said, 'These people are the perfect people to target with this. They're in pain. They have powered this country with backbreaking labor, and it's drying up; and we're gonna go get 'em because they'll eat this stuff up, and we'll tell 'em it's not addictive,' " Paisley says.

Country artists singing about substance abuse is nothing new. Alcohol is a ubiquitous subject in the genre, and marijuana is frequently celebrated, while amphetamine use is alternately winked at or swept under the rug.

The no-nonsense response to opioids is a unique moment, according to country-music scholar Amanda Marie Martínez, a doctoral fellow at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. "The growing demands country stars are making to take legal action against the opioid epidemic is an unparalleled development," she says. "This is heavily attributable to the severity of the crisis, and a testament to the level of devastation it's caused to communities across region, class, and race."

Opioids are a particularly acute problem in communities at the heart of country music. Tennessee's Davidson County was named the second-deadliest metro area in the U.S. for overdoses in a September report, and the state ranks in the top 10 for overdose death rates. West Virginia is worst of all, with more than 75 deaths out of every 100,000 residents.

Jaime Wyatt, who chronicled her journey from addiction to sobriety on albums like 2017's *Felony Blues,* says that like Shane, her way to substance abuse came through pills – in her case painkillers that were prescribed to her then-partner, who worked in construction. "In America, a lot of people come by opiate and heroin addiction honestly," Wyatt says. "Through injuries, through being overprescribed."

The issue of prescription access runs both ways, as Shane can attest. "I literally got on the internet and got a letter from a doctor saying that I needed Adderall," he says. "I never had to touch a single street drug."

Shane briefly started using again after the success of "My Boy." His guilt over losing friends, some of whom he introduced to harder drugs himself, prompted him to write "Pill."

Shane believes it is time for the genre to get more honest with itself and not lean on a favorite lyrical crutch. "I feel like country is usually hiding the real shit by talking about whiskey," he says.

Adds Wyatt, "We've got to normalize treatment and therapy, just like

ILLUSTRATION BY **ALICIA TATONE**

Cowboy Core Rides Again

From Beyoncé and a fresh class of 'hat acts' to the runway, Western vibes are everywhere – and being reclaimed by those written out of the story

THE WESTERN REVIVAL is underway. After a decade of bro-country sounds and style, where 808s and baseball caps outnumbered steel guitars and Stetsons, country is looking west for a refresh. Record labels are signing artists like Ian Munsick, Catie Offerman, and Tyler Halverson, who grew up around horses and cattle. Festivals are being held on actual ranches. And stars are stepping out, hats to boots, in fresh-off-the-runway Western wear. Even songwriters who play cowboys on TV, like *Yellowstone*'s Luke Grimes, are dropping country albums.

The pop world is saddling up, too. Post Malone and Lana Del Rey are making country turns, and Bruno Mars is dressing cowboy on Instagram. But it's Beyoncé who is at the fore of the movement, emphasizing the core culture by titling her country album *Act II: Cowboy Carter*. "I did a deeper dive into the history of country music," she said. "It feels good to see how music can unite so many people around the world, while also amplifying the voices of some of the people who have dedicated so much of their lives educating on our musical history."

Yes, a cowboy renaissance is upon us.

According to accessible-fashion brand Boohoo, TikTok videos tagged #cowboy recently hit over a billion streams in a month, while Google searches for "cowboy hat" and "bolo tie" spiked more than 200 percent and 566 percent, respectively, on the day Beyoncé dropped "Texas Hold 'Em" and "16 Carriages."

Halverson, a South Dakota native who makes what he calls "Western Amerijuana" music, says adopting cowboy style is essential to country. "The boots and hat go a long way," he says. "Before we even start singing, you already know a little bit about this person."

Beyoncé used cowboy fashion at the Grammys to telegraph her country pivot, rocking a leather Damier skirt suit from Pharrell William's Western Louis Vuitton collection, a bolo tie, and a crisp white Stetson.

"We noticed it," Stetson's marketing boss Tyler Thoreson says. Immediately, the brand reached out to Beyoncé's stylist and began making custom headwear for the singer. When she asked for a crimson hat, artisans broke the brand's neutral-color rule.

"We don't normally sell a red hat, but for Beyoncé, we made it happen," Thoreson says.

But Beyoncé, who grew up in the rodeo mecca of Houston, is doing more than sparking a fashion trend with her *Cowboy Carter* looks. Her platinum-blond hair, spurs, turquoise, and fringe are helping to course-correct the erasure of Black and brown people in country culture.

Randy Savvy, the leader of the Compton Cowboys, a California community group that introduces inner-city youth to horse culture, says the Western aesthetic is not foreign to Black history, despite how it's been depicted in entertainment.

"What Americans view as cowboys, they think about John Wayne films or the Marlboro Man, but that is only one fraction of what the culture really is," Savvy says. Beyoncé seemingly used the red Marlboro font for one of her *Cowboy Carter* shirts.

"We as Black people, every time we've entered a space, we've turned it up a notch," says Savvy. "In country music, you got Beyoncé now putting that stamp on stuff."

Halverson, for one, welcomes it. "It's expanding horizons," he says, "and getting country music in front of audiences that it normally wouldn't be in front of." ELISE BRISCO

MASON POOLE

→ OPIOIDS

you would get your oil changed on your car."

Some artists are working to do just that. Tyler Childers, who wrote about the crisis in his ballad "Nose on the Grindstone," is a driving force behind the Healing Appalachia music festival, a recovery fundraiser in Huntington, West Virginia. The event, co-founded by his manager, Ian Thornton, was established after 26 people overdosed in Huntington in one day in August 2016.

The festival takes place each September – National Recovery Month – and highlights recovery through testimonials, and tutorials for naloxone, a drug used to reverse opioid overdoses. "This is a drive-thru society that's faced with a real public-health crisis," says Dave Lavender, board president of Hope for the Hills, the nonprofit behind Healing Appalachia. "It doesn't have an easy fix."

Paisley is cautiously optimistic. "There's an enormous amount of hope with this issue," he says. "I think that we crested a wave of enabled, 'legal' drug abuse into now something where everyone knows there's this problem."

Shane and Wyatt have both done the work at their shows, uniting with the program End Overdose to teach fans to recognize the signs of an overdose. They advocate for venues to carry Narcan and fentanyl test strips, even for nondrug users.

"What we've learned is that drug users are no longer the expendables," Wyatt says. "It's your nieces, your nephews. It's your family members."

It is a lesson that Shane himself learned a long time ago, and one that he will likely live with for the rest of his life. "People need to recognize that maybe just because you do this shit on weekends, that doesn't necessarily mean you don't have a problem," he says. "It starts like that for a lot of people."

"The best thing about country music to me is the storytelling," Crockett says.

▲ Crockett's preshow ritual always involves his guitar: "I play acoustic as much as possible. That probably comes from my hobo and street-performer days where we would play all day in New Orleans on the corner or in New York City on the subway, or on the street in Colorado."

TOUR DIARY

The Observational Troubadour

Whether on the road in Australia or Nashville, Charley Crockett is always listening for his next song

Photographs by **JAMIE WDZIEKONSKI**

▶ In the elevator backstage at the Forum Theatre in Melbourne, Australia, Crockett and his band carry their own gear. He's not shy about doing things on his own — like releasing all 13 of his albums independently. "I've never been on a major label," he says. "In fact, I just keep dodging them."

“ALL ROSES!” CHARLEY CROCKETT replies when asked how he’s doing. The songwriter says he picked up the phrase on tour after hearing a gas-station attendant use it and is now writing a song with that title. Crockett, a thrilling live performer who can transport country fans to lonesome highways or dusty Western towns with his observational lyrics, is always writing while on the road. His new album, *$10 Cowboy,* released in April, was birthed almost entirely on the go.

“I actually have trouble writing just sitting right at the house. I need to be moving,” he says before a gig in Miami. “When I’m on the road, people’s stories are just spilling out on the street in front of me, and I’m always wanting to take those pieces.”

The other day, he overheard a drifter remark, “I’m not done losing yet,” and jotted it down. “It’s those things that slowly turn into songs and land on records,” he says.

Crockett’s been prolifically recording albums since returning to his native Texas, in 2015, after years as a street performer. In 2023, he dropped his 12th, *The Man From Waco,* and began selling out rooms like Nashville’s Ryman Auditorium and playing for audiences around the globe: RS cameras captured him at a gig in Australia.

“We’re having a lot of success outside of the U.S.,” Crockett says. “Maybe over the years, the word of mouth has helped me to be able to go [abroad] and sell tickets. I’m happy about that.” **JOSEPH HUDAK**

▲ Backstage after a gig, Crockett typically greets friends and then retires to his bus. “I get out of my wet clothes and get the movies on the satellite,” he says. “I like to watch a Western or an old French-language film.”

▲ Crockett honed his stage moves as a street performer. “It’s not easy to get people’s attention,” he says. “It’s about putting down your inhibitions.”

◀ Before the concert, Crockett autographs posters and copies of his albums to sell at the merch table. “I sign probably a couple hundred vinyl a night,” he says. “And I spend every dollar that comes in on the show. It’s really important to me that people leave my show — no matter what the ticket price is — like, ‘Man, I got a deal.’ ”

▲ Cowboy music is red-hot right now, but Crockett’s been writing and recording Western-themed songs for more than a decade. “Authenticity should not be mistaken for amateur realism. Authenticity is hard-won,” he says. “I couldn’t put out *$10 Cowboy* without all those records that came up before it.”

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Fake Photos, Real Harm: AOC and the Fight Against AI Porn

Deepfakes are easier to make than ever – and our sense of reality and democracy are at risk

By LORENA O'NEIL

ALEXANDRIA OCASIO-CORTEZ was in a car talking with her staffers about legislation and casually scrolling through her X mentions when she saw the photo. It was the end of February, and after spending most of the week in D.C., she was looking forward to flying down to Orlando to see her mom after a work event. But everything left her mind once she saw the picture: a digitally altered image of someone forcing her to put her mouth on their genitals. Adrenaline coursed through her, and her first thought was "I need to get this off my screen." She closed out of it, shaken.

"There's a shock to seeing images of yourself that someone could think are real," the congresswoman tells me. It's a few days after she saw the disturbing deepfake, and we're waiting for our food in a corner booth of a retro-style diner in Queens, New York, near her neighborhood. She's friendly and animated throughout our conversation, maintaining eye contact and passionately responding to my questions. When she tells me this story, though, she slows down, takes more pauses and plays with the delicate rings on her right hand. "As a survivor of physical sexual assault, it adds a level of dysregulation," she says. "It resurfaces trauma, while I'm trying to – in the middle of a fucking meeting."

The violent picture stayed in Ocasio-Cortez's head all day.

"There are certain images that don't leave a person, they can't leave a person," she says. "It's not a question of mental strength or fortitude – this is about neuroscience and our biology." She tells me about scientific reports she's read about how it's difficult for our brains to separate visceral images on a phone from reality, even if we know they are fake. "It's not as imaginary as people want to make it seem. It has real, real effects not just on the people that are victimized by it, but on the people who see it and consume it."

"And once you've seen it, you've seen it," Ocasio-Cortez says. "It parallels the same exact intention of physical rape and sexual assault, [which] is about power, domination, and humiliation. Deepfakes are absolutely a way of digitizing violent humiliation against other people."

She hadn't publicly announced it yet, but she tells me about a new piece of legislation she's working on to end nonconsensual, sexually explicit deepfakes. Throughout our lunch, she keeps coming back to it – something real and concrete she could do so this doesn't happen to anyone else.

Deepfake porn is just one way artificial intelligence makes abuse easier, and the technology is getting better every day. From the moment AOC won her primary in 2018, she's dealt with fake and manipulated images, whether through the use of Photoshop or generative AI. There are photos out there of her wearing swastikas; there are videos in which her voice has been cloned to say things she didn't say. Someone created an image of a fake tweet to make it look like Ocasio-Cortez was complaining that all of her shoes had been stolen during the Jan. 6 insurrection. For months, people asked her about her lost shoes. These examples are in addition to countless fake nudes or sexually explicit images of her that can be found online, particularly on X.

Ocasio-Cortez is one of the most visible politicians in the country right now – and she's a young Latina woman up for reelection in 2024, which means she's on the front lines of a disturbing, unpredictable era of being a public figure. An overwhelming 96 percent of deepfake videos are nonconsensual porn, all of which feature women, according to a recent study by the cybersecurity company DeepTrace Labs. And women who face multiple forms of discrimination, including women of color, LGBTQ+ people, and women with disabilities, are at heightened risk to experience technology-facilitated

PHOTOGRAPH IN ILLUSTRATION BY TOM WILLIAMS/CQ ROLL CALL/GETTY IMAGES

ILLUSTRATION BY **Matthieu Bourel**

gender-based violence, says a report from U.N. Women.

In 2023, more deepfake abuse videos were shared than in every other year in history combined, according to an analysis by independent researcher Genevieve Oh. What used to take skillful, tech-savvy experts hours to Photoshop can now be whipped up at a moment's notice with the help of an app. Some deepfake websites even offer tutorials on how to create AI pornography.

What happens if we don't get this under control? It will further blur the lines between what's real and what's not – as politics become more and more polarized. What will happen when voters can't separate truth from lies? And what are the stakes? As we get closer to the presidential election, democracy itself could be at risk. And, as Ocasio-Cortez points out in our conversation, it's about much more than imaginary images.

THE FIGHTER Ocasio-Cortez is co-leading the effort to stop AI abuse.

"It's so important to me that people understand that this is not just a form of interpersonal violence, it's not just about the harm that's done to the victim," she says about nonconsensual deepfake porn. She puts down her spoon and leans forward. "Because this technology threatens to do it at scale – this is about class subjugation. It's a subjugation of entire people. And then when you do intersect that with abortion, when you do intersect that with debates over bodily autonomy, when you are able to actively subjugate all women in society on a scale of millions, at once digitally, it's a direct connection [with] taking their rights away."

She's at her most energized in these moments of our conversation, when she's emphasizing how pervasive this problem is going to be, for so many people. She doesn't sound like a rehearsed politician spouting out sound bites. She sounds genuinely concerned – distressed, even – about how this technology will impact humanity.

Ocasio-Cortez is living through this nightmare as she fights it. She's watched her body, her voice, everything about herself distorted into a horror-film version of reality. It's deeply personal, but if she can figure out the antidote to help end this shape-shifting form of abuse, it could change how the rest of us experience the world.

BACK IN THE EARLY 2010S, before generative AI was widespread, abuse experts rang warning bells about altered images being used to intimidate communities online. Nighat Dad is a human-rights lawyer in Pakistan who runs a helpline for survivors being blackmailed using images, both real and manipulated. The consequences there are dire – Dad says some instances have resulted in honor killings by family members and suicide.

"This process has been going on for a while, and women of color, feminists from the Global South have been raising this issue for so long and nobody paid any attention," Dad says.

Here in the U.S., Rep. Yvette Clarke (D-N.Y.) has tried for years to get Congress to act. In 2017, she began to notice how often Black women were harassed on social media, whether they were the targets of racist remarks or offensive, manipulated images. On the internet, bigotry is often more overt, where trolls feel safe hiding behind their screens.

"That's what really triggered me in terms of a deeper dive into how technology can be utilized overall to disrupt, interfere, and harm vulnerable populations in particular," Clarke says.

At the time, the technology around deepfakes was still emerging, and she wanted to establish guardrails and get ahead of the harms, before they became prevalent.

"It was an uphill battle," Clarke says, noting that there weren't many people in Congress who had even heard of this technology, let alone were thinking of regulating it. Alongside Clarke, Sen. Ben Sasse (R-Neb.) was an exception; he introduced a bill in December 2018, but it was short-lived. On the House side, the first congressional hearing on deepfakes and disinformation was in June 2019, timed with Clarke's bill, the DeepFakes Accountability Act. The legislation was an attempt to establish criminal penalties and provide legal recourse to deepfake victims. She reintroduced it in September 2023.

In May 2023, Rep. Joe Morelle (D-N.Y.) introduced the Preventing Deepfakes of Intimate Images Act, which would have criminalized the sharing of nonconsensual and sexually explicit deepfakes. Like previous deepfake legislation, it didn't pick up steam. Clarke says she thinks it's taken a while for Congress to understand just how serious and pervasive of an issue this is.

Now, finally, people are starting to pay attention to the dangers of all types of AI abuse. Clarke is vice chair of the Congressional Black Caucus, which just announced the launch of an AI policy series that will look at this kind of technology through the lens of race. The series will address algorithmic bias in AI systems and will educate the public on misinformation, particularly in regard to disinformation campaigns against Black voters. And Clarke is a part of the House's new bipartisan task force on AI, alongside Ocasio-Cortez and 22 other members, plus the two leaders of the House.

"Thank God, folks have finally recognized that civil rights are being violated," Clarke says. "The work that we do now has implications not just for this generation, and not just for now, but for future generations. And that's why it's important that we act swiftly."

As the technology has advanced rapidly, so has the abuse. And as Clarke points out, the harm is no longer just focused on marginalized communities. It's become widespread, affecting teens and college students across the country. It can happen to anyone with a photograph online.

In May 2020, Taylor (who asked to use an alias to avoid further abuse) had just graduated college and was quarantining with her boyfriend in New England when she received an odd email, with the subject line: "Fake account in your name." A former classmate of hers had written the email, which started out, "Look, this is a really weird email to write, but I thought you would want to know."

The classmate went on to tell Taylor he'd seen a fake Pornhub account of hers with her name and personal information on it. "It looks like they used a deepfake to put your face on top of some videos," he wrote.

Confused, Taylor decided it must be spam. She sent the classmate a message on Facebook saying, "Hey, I just want to let you know your account got hacked." No, he replied, it had been a genuine email.

Four years later, she recalls that she hadn't even known what a deepfake was at the time. She opened her boyfriend's computer and went to the Pornhub link her classmate messaged her. When the website loaded, she saw her face staring back at her in a sexually explicit video she'd never made.

"It was surreal seeing my face ... especially the eyes," she tells me during a zoom call. "They looked kind of dead inside ... like the deepfake looked realistic but it doesn't quite look like – it looks like me if I was spacing out."

She noticed the account had multiple videos posted on it, with photos taken from her Facebook and Instagram pages. And the videos already had thousands of views. She read the

"It's so important to me that people understand that this is not just a form of interpersonal violence. This technology threatens to do it at scale – this is about class subjugation of entire people."

LORENA O'NEIL *wrote about women who work in AI for the September issue.*

comments and realized some people thought the videos were real. Even scarier, the Pornhub profile had all of her very real personal information listed: her full name, her hometown, her school. (A spokesperson for Pornhub says nonconsensual deepfakes are banned from the site and that it has teams that review and remove the content once they are made aware of it.)

Taylor started diving deeper online and realized multiple fake accounts with videos had been made in her name, on various sites.

Suddenly, Taylor realized why she'd seen an uptick in messages on all of her social media accounts the past few weeks. She immediately felt very concerned about her physical safety.

"I had no idea if the person who did it was near me location-wise, [or] if they were going to do anything else to me," Taylor says. "I had no idea if anyone who saw that video was going to try to find me. I was very physically vulnerable at that point."

She and her boyfriend called the local police, who didn't provide much assistance. Taylor played phone tag with a detective who told her, "I really have to examine these profiles," which creeped her out. Eventually, she says, he told her that this was technically legal, and whoever did it had a right to.

It was the first few months of Covid, and Taylor, who lives with anxiety and obsessive compulsive disorder, says she'd already been facing a general sense of worry and paranoia, but this exacerbated everything. She got nervous when going out that a stranger would recognize her from the videos. She fixated on who in her life had seen them. On the verge of starting graduate school, she wondered if future employers would find them and if her career would be over before it had even started.

In the months that followed, Taylor discovered that a girl she knew from school had also had this happen to her. Through their conversations, they were able to pinpoint a guy they'd both had a falling out with – a guy who happened to be very tech-savvy. As they continued to investigate, they came across multiple women from their college who'd been similarly targeted, all connected to this man they call Mike. But the state police were never able to prove he made the videos.

Taylor was one of the first to speak out about her AI abuse, anonymously sharing her story in the 2023 documentary *Another Body*. The filmmakers have started an organization called #MyImageMyChoice to tackle intimate image abuse. In March, the organizers co-hosted a virtual summit on deepfake abuse, with legal experts, advocates, and survivors like actor Sophia Bush telling their stories.

"One of my big concerns is that we're just going to enter this post-truth world where nothing you see online is trustworthy, because everything can be generated in a very realistic yet fake way," Chowdhury says.

Taylor says that in the aftermath of that deepfake, she often feels out of control of her own life. She compensates for it by trying to be in control of other situations. She repeatedly beeps her car to make sure that it's locked, and is often terrified the coffee pot is still on and her house is going to catch on fire. "I still deal with it today," she says of her heightened OCD.

Mike was interested in neural networks and machine learning, Taylor says, which is how she suspects he could have created the deepfake before there were easily accessible apps that did this instantaneously like there are now. According to #MyImageMyChoice, there are more than 290 deepfake porn apps (also known as nudify apps), 80 percent of which have launched in the past year. Google Search drives 68 percent of traffic to the sites.

One of the people Taylor's been connected to in the online abuse-advocacy space is Adam Dodge, the founder of the digital-safety education organization EndTAB (Ending Tech-Enabled Abuse). Dodge tells me people often underlook the extreme helplessness and disempowerment that comes with this form of tech-enabled trauma, because the abuse can feel inescapable.

For example, in revenge porn, when someone's intimate images are leaked by a partner, survivors often try to assert control by promising to never take pictures like that again. With a deepfake, there is no way to prevent it from happening because somebody can manifest that abuse whenever and wherever they want, at scale.

Dodge wants to reframe the conversation; instead of highlighting the phenomenon of new technology being able to create these hyperrealistic images, he wants to shift the focus to how this is creating an unprecedented amount of sexual-violence victims. He thinks that the more people are educated about this as a form of abuse, versus as a harmless joke, the more it could help with prevention.

He brings up a recent New Jersey school incident where someone made AI-generated nudes of female classmates. "The fact they were able to spin up these images so quickly on their phones with little to no tech expertise and engage in sexual violence and abuse at scale in their school is really worrisome."

RUMMAN CHOWDHURY IS no stranger to the horrors of online harassment; she was once the head of ethical AI at X, back when it was called Twitter and before Elon Musk decimated her department. She knows firsthand how difficult it is to control harassment campaigns, and also how marginalized groups are often disproportionately targeted on these platforms. She recently co-published a paper for UNESCO with research assistant Dhanya Lakshmi on ways generative AI will exacerbate what is referred to in the industry as technology-facilitated gender-based violence.

"In the paper, we actually demonstrate code-based examples of how easy it is for someone to not just create harassing images, but plan, schedule, and coordinate an entire harassment campaign," says Chowdhury, who currently works at the State Department, serving as the U.S. Science Envoy for AI, connecting policymakers, community organizers, and industry with the goal of developing responsible AI.

Chowdhury rattles off ways people can use technology to help them make at-scale harassment campaigns. They can ask generative AI to not only write negative messages, but also to translate them into different languages, dialects, or slang. They can use this information to create fake personas, so one person can target a politician and say that she's unqualified or ugly, but make it look like 10 people are saying it. They can use text-to-image models to alter pictures, which Chowdhury and Lakshmi did for their research, asking a program to dress one woman up like a jihadi soldier and changing another woman's shirt to say Blue Lives Matter. And they didn't have to trick or hack the model to generate these images.

And it's not just about generation, it's about amplification, which happens even when people aren't trying to be cruel. It's something Chowdhury often saw while working at X – people retweeting a fake photo or video, not knowing it's not real.

"People will inadvertently amplify misleading information all the time," Chowdhury says. "It is a very big problem and also one of the hardest problems to address because the individual did not have malicious intent. They saw something that looked realistic."

She says she thinks a lot of people have learned not to believe everything they read on the internet, but they don't have the same mental guard against video and audio. We tend to believe those are true, because it used to be difficult to fake them. Chowdhury says she doesn't know if we are all going to get better at identifying fake content, or if we will just stop trusting everything we see online.

"One of my big concerns is that we're just going to enter this post-truth world where nothing you see online is trustworthy, because everything can be generated in a very, very realistic yet fake way," Chowdhury tells me.

This is a human problem that needs a human solution. As Chowdhury points out, it's not an easy problem to solve, but it doesn't mean we shouldn't try to. She offers up a multiprong approach. Social media companies can track individual accounts to see if they are coordinating with other people, or whether the same IP address has multiple accounts. They can adjust the algorithms that drive what people are seeing. People can mobilize their own communities by talking about media literacy. Legislators can work on protections and regulations, and find protections that don't just put the onus on the survivor to take action. Generative-AI developers and the technology companies that platform them can be more transparent in their actions and more careful about what products they release to the public. (X didn't respond to a request for comment.)

Mary Anne Franks, a legal scholar specializing in free speech and online harassment, says it's entirely pos-

OPPOSITE PAGE: KENT NISHIMURA/"LOS ANGELES TIMES"/GETTY IMAGES

sible to craft legislation that prohibits harmful and false information without infringing on the First Amendment. "Parody and satire make clear that the information being presented is false – there is a clear line between mocking someone and pretending to be someone," she says.

"And while the Supreme Court has held that some false speech may be protected," she adds, "it has never held that there is a First Amendment right to intentionally engage in false speech that causes actual harm."

Franks wants to see legislation on deepfake-AI porn include a criminal component as well as a civil component, because, she says, people are more often fearful of going to jail versus fearful of getting sued about something so abstract and misunderstood.

"While it is true that the U.S. is guilty of overcriminalizing many kinds of conduct, we have the opposite problem when it comes to abuses disproportionately targeted at women and girls," Franks says, citing how domestic abuse, rape, and stalking are underprosecuted.

Online abuse disproportionately targets marginalized groups, but it also often affects women in public spaces, like journalists or politicians. Women at the intersection of these identities are particularly vulnerable.

Rep. Summer Lee (D-Pa.) says she often thinks about how rapidly this technology is advancing, especially given the unprecedented levels of harassment public figures face on social media platforms.

"There is just such a fear that so many of us have, that there will be no mechanisms to protect us," Lee says. She says she already sees a world in which Black people and other marginalized folks are skeptical of the system following disinformation campaigns: "It makes voters and people who would otherwise run [for office] afraid that the system itself is untrustworthy. When I think about women who will run, especially Black and brown women, we have to think about the ways in which our images will be used and abused. That is a constant fear of women, and particularly women of color, who think about whether or not they want to put themselves out on a limb to run for Congress.

"You lose control of yourself to an extent when you are putting yourself out there to run for office, but in this era, it takes on a new meaning of what it means to lose control of your image, of your personhood. The ways in which this technology can exploit and abuse it, how it can spread, it can ruin not just reputations but lives."

AT THE DELI, Ocasio-Cortez tells me something similar. We're talking about how real the harm is for the victims of this kind of abuse. "Kids are going to kill themselves over this," she says. "People are going to kill themselves over this."

I ask Ocasio-Cortez what she would tell a teenage girl who has been victimized by AI abuse. "First of all, I think it's important for her to know and what I want to tell her is that society has failed you," she says. "Someone did this to you and it's wrong, but society has failed you. People should not have the tools to do this.

"My main priority is making sure that she doesn't internalize it, that the crime is not complete," Ocasio-Cortez says. I ask her how she personally deals with it – is there something she does to avoid internalizing the abuse?

"I think of it not as an on switch or an off switch," she says, adding that she often has young women asking her how it's so easy for her to speak up. "It's not," she tells me. She slows down again, choosing her words carefully. "I think of it as a discipline, a practice. It's like, 'How good am I going to be at this today?' Because some days I suck, some days I do internalize it, some days I don't speak up because things have gotten to me."

Ocasio-Cortez says that a lot of her politics are motivated by a sense of not wanting other people to experience the things that she or others have. "A lot of my work has to do with chain breaking, the cycle breaking, and this, to me, is a really, really, really important cycle to break," she says.

We talk about Taylor Swift's sexually explicit AI photos that went viral in January – she remembers being horrified when she heard about them. She'd already been working on the deepfake-AI legislation when it happened, but she says the Swift incident helped accelerate the timeline on the bipartisan, bicameral legislation. Sens. Dick Durbin (D-Ill.) and Lindsey Graham (R-S.C.) are leading the Senate version of the bill, while Ocasio-Cortez leads the House version. It's called the Disrupt Explicit Forged Images and Non-Consensual Edits (DEFIANCE) Act of 2024. The legislation amends the Violence Against Women Act so that people can sue those who produce, distribute, or receive the deepfake pornography, if they "knew or recklessly disregarded" that the victim did not consent to those images.

The bill defines "digital forgeries" as images "created through the use of software, machine learning, artificial intelligence, or any other computer-generated or technological means to falsely appear to be authentic." Any digital forgeries that depict the victims "in the nude or engaged in sexually explicit conduct or sexual scenarios" would qualify. If the bill passes the House and Senate, it would become the first federal law to protect victims of deepfakes.

The bill has support from both sides of the aisle, bringing together unlikely partners. For example, Rep. Nancy Mace (R-S.C.), who has publicly feuded with Ocasio-Cortez in the past, is a co-sponsor of the DEFIANCE Act.

"Congress is spearheading this much-needed initiative to address gaps in our legal framework against digital exploitation," says a spokesperson for Mace, who recently introduced her own bill criminalizing deepfake porn. "Together, we are combating this chilling new wave of abuse against women and confronting the alarming rise in deepfake child pornography. We aim to bring perpetrators to justice and ensure the safety and security of all individuals in the digital realm."

Durbin tells me he thinks the key to passing DEFIANCE into law is its significant bipartisan support.

"I really believe that politicians from both political parties and every political stripe are coming to the realization that this is a real danger," he says, adding that having Ocasio-Cortez as a partner on the DEFIANCE Act is important.

"I'm saddened that she's gone through this experience personally," says Durbin. "But it certainly gives her credibility when she speaks to the issue."

At lunch, I ask Ocasio-Cortez if she thought the fact that she was the youngest woman to serve in Congress – and a woman of color – has to do with why she's a lightning rod for this type of harassment.

"Absolutely," she says, without a moment's hesitation. I ask her why she thinks people often target women in leadership roles.

"They want to teach us a lesson for being there, for existing: This is not your place, and because you're here, we're going to punish you," she says.

We talk about fascinations people have with public figures, whether they're artists, influencers, or politicians.

"People increasingly, since the emergence of smartphones, have relied on the internet as a proxy for human experience," Ocasio-Cortez says. "And so if this becomes the primary medium through which people engage the world, at least in this country, then manipulating that becomes manipulating reality."

The fight for reality can sometimes feel futile. Facing the AI frontier, it's hard not to feel an undercurrent of dread. Are we entering a post-truth world where facts are elusive and society's most marginalized are only further abused? Or is there still time to navigate toward a better, more equitable future?

"There have been times in the past where I did have moments where I'm like, 'I don't know if I can survive this,'" Ocasio-Cortez says quietly. "And in those moments sometimes I remember, 'Yeah, that's the point. That is quite literally the point.' I was the youngest woman elected to Congress, and it took over 200 years for a woman in her twenties to get elected to Congress, when this country was founded by 25-year-old dudes! Do people think that's a fucking coincidence?"

She's back to being animated, and she seamlessly ties it back to her work: "It is by design, and even the AI represents – not AI in general, but this use of AI – the automation of that design. It's the automation of a society where you can have an entire country be founded by 25-year-old men, but it takes over 200 years for a 29-year-old woman to get elected to Congress. And then once she is elected, they do everything in their power to get her to leave."

She leans in and smiles.

"And guess what, motherfuckers? I'm not going anywhere. Deal with it."

"When I think about women who will run [for office], especially Black and brown women, we have to think about ways our images will be used and abused," Lee says.

ART HISTORY
"Black Renaissance," by Rayvenn D'Clark, is one of the park's sculptures.

The Ghosts of Alabama

With the new Freedom Monument Sculpture Park in Montgomery, Bryan Stevenson and his Equal Justice Initiative have assembled 'a great cloud of witnesses' to outlast assaults on Black history

By DONOVAN X. RAMSEY

EQUAL JUSTICE INITIATIVE/HUMAN PICTURES

MY RECENT TRIP TO MONTGOMERY, ALABAMA, wasn't my first. I had previously explored the city and the sites associated with Bryan Stevenson's Equal Justice Initiative (EJI) in 2019, in what turned out to be a pivotal moment – after Donald Trump's ascent to power, but before the pandemic brought the world to a standstill. It was also before the 2020 killing of George Floyd sparked widespread protests and a year of reconstruction.

I remember the world around me, even Trump's presidency, making sense as I left the Legacy Museum, dedicated to the legacy of slavery in the United States. The National Memorial for Peace and Justice, which honors victims of lynching, inspired the thought that maybe – just maybe – the worst was behind us. It feels like a lifetime ago.

I struggled with the idea of returning this spring to experience a new EJI site, to witness the unveiling of the Freedom Monument Sculpture Park. Like many Americans, I imagine, I am too anxious about the future of the country to look back at history, again. I anticipated being triggered by the Legacy Museum and having my grief compounded by the National Memorial for Peace and Justice. But the new sculpture park promised a revival of sorts.

"We want everybody to come here – and don't be afraid – nothing bad is going to happen to you if you come," Stevenson says about the new, complete sites. "Now you're going to have to understand some things – you're going to hear some things that are challenging, and uncomfortable. But that's part of how we grow."

So, despite my reservations, or maybe because of them, I returned to Montgomery to be saved from my anxieties and to receive, Lord willing, some fresh measure of hopefulness. You can get to the park by boat via the muddy waters of the Alabama River, which once trafficked enslaved Africans. Another route is via a shuttle that crosses railroad tracks laid by the enslaved, and which also served as delivery networks for human cargo. Together, these networks transported hundreds of enslaved Africans to Montgomery each day, according to estimates from the Equal Justice Initiative. By 1860, 66 percent of Montgomery's population was enslaved, 23,710 people, a larger enslaved population than Mobile, Alabama; New Orleans; and Natchez, Mississippi.

The rushing river, the sound of a distant train approaching, and the towering trees in every direction are the park's first exhibits. They were passive participants in the history. They were witnesses.

REVISITING THE PAST Bryan Stevenson (right), who founded the nonprofit Equal Justice Initiative, just opened the Freedom Monument Sculpture Park in Montgomery, Alabama, this spring. Hank Willis Thomas' "Strike" (above) and "Mama, I Hurt My Hand" (far right), by artist Kwame Akoto-Bamfo, are two of the featured works in the new park.

A series of circular paths cuts through the 17 acres that make up the park. As I wandered them, I encountered a symphony of voices rendered in wood, stone, and metal. One bend features 170-year-old dwellings acquired from former cotton plantations nearby, a whipping post, and replicas of a rail car and a holding pen. Others are dotted with sculptures designed to tell a story – works by Alison Saar, Kwame Akoto-Bamfo, Hank Willis Thomas, Cliff Fragua, Wangechi Mutu, Rose B. Simpson, Theaster Gates, and Kehinde Wiley.

At the entrance of the park, visitors are greeted by a 16-foot-tall bronze bust of a Black woman with a body shape inspired by the dwellings of the Musgum people of Cameroon and Chad. Artist Simone Leigh's "Brick House" is stoic and ancestral, "mighty, mighty," like the Commodores song.

Amid contentious debates over book bans, assaults on Black scholarship, and the manipulation of educational curricula across the United States, the Freedom Monument Sculpture Park emerges as a beacon of truth and reconciliation.

Consider, for example, that just in March, Alabama Gov. Kay Ivey signed a bill banning state funding for diversity, equity, and inclusion programs in schools, public colleges, and state agencies. The new law also imposes restrictions on what it calls eight "divisive concepts," including – poignantly – the idea that "any individual should accept, acknowledge, affirm, or assent to a sense of guilt, complicity, or a need to apologize on the basis of his or her race, color, religion, sex, ethnicity, or national origin." According to *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 82 such anti-DEI bills have been introduced in 28 states and Congress since 2023, with measures signed into law in 10 states.

"We cannot be intimidated or silenced by some foolish legislation or reckless politicians who are trying to characterize [learning about history] as destructive, when in fact, it's the silence that's been so destructive," Stevenson says. "Of course, there are going to be people who try to politicize and demonize – all of that stuff. That's how you know you're doing something powerful, because people are afraid of what could happen when their children and their grandchildren begin to understand that there's a better way to move through this world."

EJI's sites are outgrowths of its work providing free legal representation for people on death row. (Stevenson chronicled one of his early cases in the best-selling 2014 memoir *Just Mercy*, which became a feature film in 2019, starring Michael B. Jordan.) EJI is financially independent, with some of its earliest seed money coming from Stevenson's own MacArthur "genius" grant in 1995. The nonprofit has attracted generous support in the years since from people who believe in Stevenson's mission.

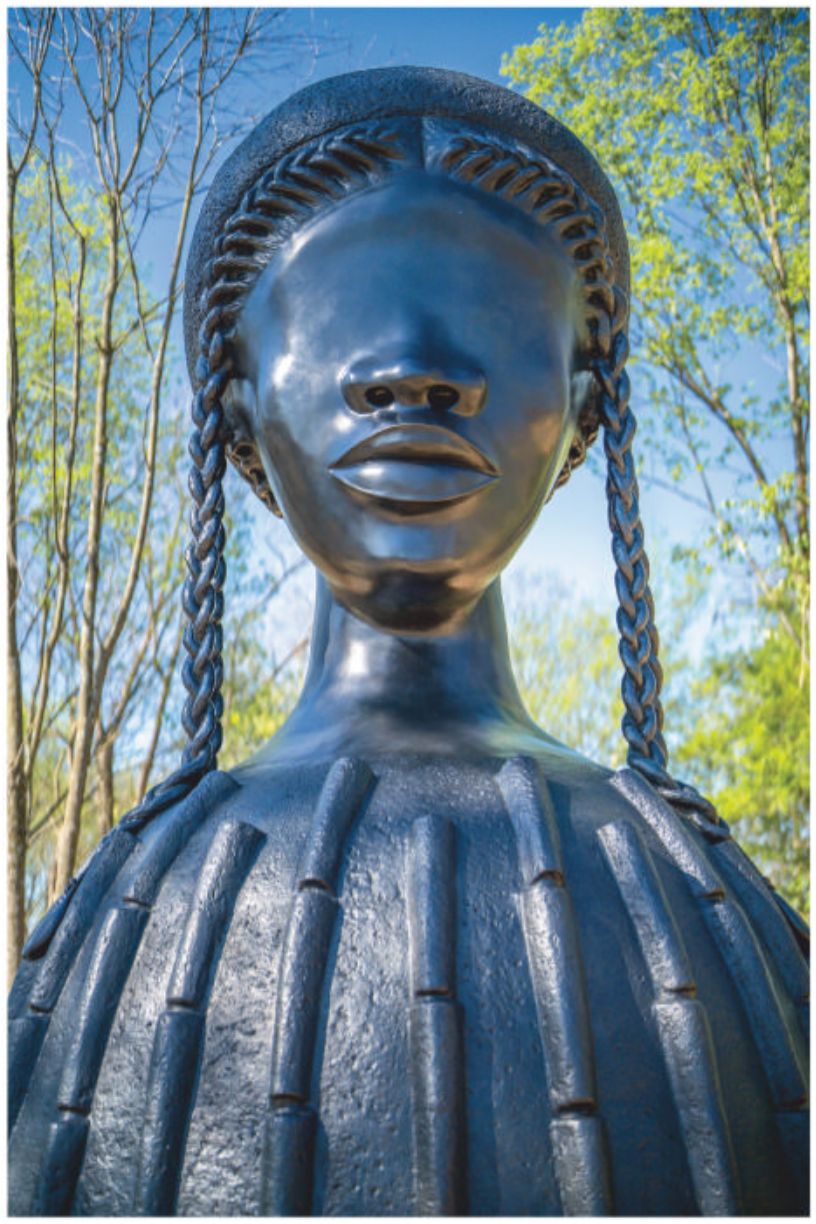
"I have not taken a penny of state or federal money for any of our sites. The truth is, we haven't been offered any state or federal money," he says with a chuckle. "At this point, I wouldn't take it if it was offered, because we have to have the autonomy and the latitude to tell the truth without fear that our ability to operate or to function is going to be compromised or undermined. That has allowed us to do what we think is right and do what we think is important, despite the winds out there that are pushing in an unhealthy direction."

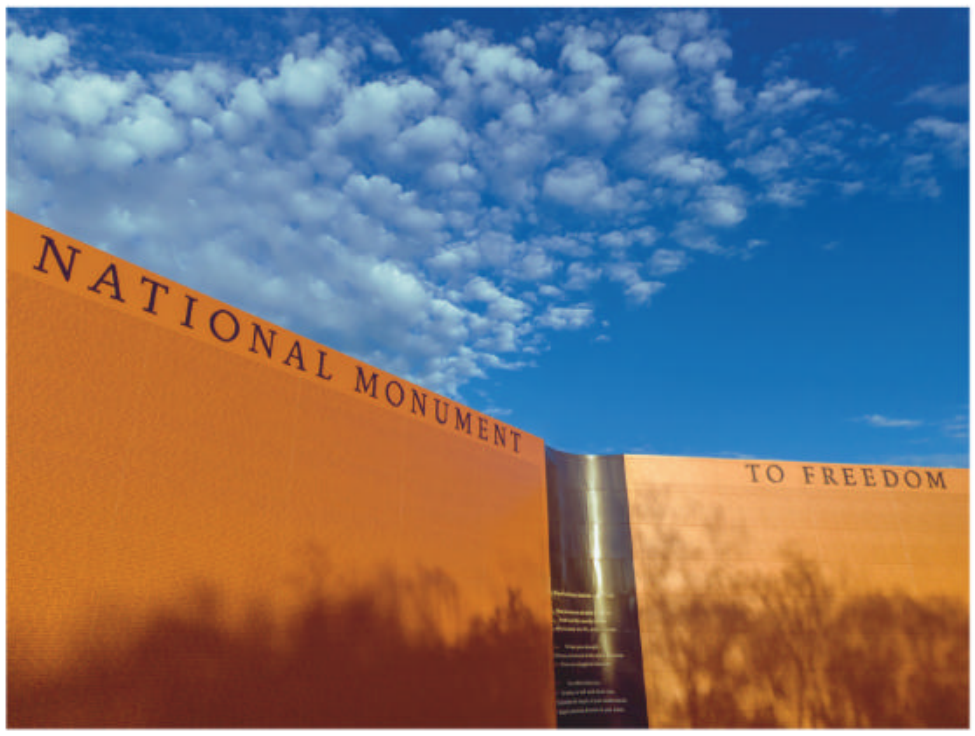
Howard Robinson, a Montgomery-based historian, member of Alabama's Black Heritage Council, and associate library director at Alabama State University, recalls the Equal Justice Initiative's beginnings were humble amid a similar landscape. EJI was still merely a legal nonprofit housed in an unassuming building on Commerce Street more than a decade ago. When Stevenson learned of the source of said commerce – slave markets made up of structures that peppered downtown Montgomery – he set out to put up historical markers at those sites, including one in front of his own organization's building, the site of a former warehouse for the enslaved.

When the request to erect the markers in 2013 first went up before the Alabama Historical Association, the group declined to sponsor them because of the "potential for controversy," according to *The New York Times*. Then-Mayor

DONOVAN X. RAMSEY *is the author of "When Crack Was King" and a journalist who covers identity and justice. This is his first story for* ROLLING STONE.

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: EQUAL JUSTICE INITIATIVE/HUMAN PICTURES, 2; WULF BRADLEY/"THE NEW YORK TIMES"/REDUX





A PERSONAL CONNECTION Simone Leigh's "Brick House" (far left) greets visitors to the park. The final sculpture is the soaring National Monument to Freedom (above), which lists "over 122,000 surnames that nearly 5 million Black people adopted in 1870." The author found his own family's name — Ramsey — carved there (left).

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: EQUAL JUSTICE INITIATIVE/HUMAN PICTURES, 2; COURTESY OF DONOVAN X. RAMSEY

Todd Strange expressed concerns that one of the markers, which named slave traders, would offend the descendants of former slavers, before ultimately backing the project.

"It gives you a sense of the climate of Montgomery, that there was hostility and reluctance to address a marker that draws attention to elements of the city's past," Robinson says.

Today, Stevenson has achieved so much more in the Freedom Monument Sculpture Park. He has assembled what the Bible describes as "a great cloud of witnesses" that empowers believers to "throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles."

"I really do think we have to have that attitude that our foreparents had, which is 'Ain't gonna let nobody turn me around,'" he says. "We just have to be really persistent and diligent, and determined. I am persuaded that truth is powerful, that you can't ultimately succeed in suppressing truth with fear or anger."

Through her work in the organization's educational programs, EJI project manager Mia Taylor has seen firsthand the transformative power of engaging with history. She keeps a log of poignant reflections from students who've visited the sites, expressing how learning about their history – including the most painful parts – has empowered them, not traumatized them, as some lawmakers have suggested would happen.

"If we don't talk about it, we wouldn't be honoring those who made the sacrifices to get us where we are" is how one student put it after their visit.

"You try to explain history, but without the full context, it's really hard to fully understand," Taylor says. "Glossing over certain parts does everyone a disservice."

Rose B. Simpson's "Counterculture" series is not too far away from "Brick House." Its dyed and cast concrete figures stand approximately 10 feet tall, with hollowed eyes honoring the Indigenous peoples as the first stewards of the land.

"They're about accountability," Simpson reflects, "and how you act when you know that you're being seen by what we consider inanimate."

The inclusion of Simpson's work, and that of other Indigenous artists, shows the park's ethos – a commitment to telling the full, complex story of America, inclusive of all its voices and perspectives.

Farther into the park, Alison Saar's "Tree Souls" and Hank Willis Thomas' "Strike" offer profound reflections on resistance and solidarity. Saar's sculpture depicts figures suspended by gnarled roots, while Thomas' stainless-steel masterpiece captures the tension of a confrontation between a protester and a police officer – a haunting reminder of struggles past and present.

"Strike" reflects the complex interplay of struggle and peace that has characterized Black American history.

"I was thinking a lot about the ways in which that kind of [resistance] has taken various forms," Thomas explains. And the choice of shiny, reflective stainless steel is also significant. "It's important for us to see ourselves in moments in history," he says.

Saar, a Los Angeles-based sculptor and artist, says her contribution is meant to explore the sanctuary found in swamps and other hostile environments by escaped enslaved Africans, so-called maroons.

"These spaces were not ideal," Saar says, "but they were a refuge for a lot of people that were trying to somehow survive outside of the horrors of colonialism."

The journey culminates at the National Monument to Freedom, a great metal wall standing 43 feet tall and stretching 155 feet long. Drawing from the 1870 Census, the monument evokes more witnesses, listing, according to EJI, "over 122,000 surnames that nearly 5 million Black people adopted in 1870 and that tens of millions of people now carry across generations."

More than 500,000 people a year visit EJI's sites, with the new monument likely to attract even more. For them, one unavoidable takeaway is that white supremacy is a myth along with American exceptionalism. Another is that Black people are here to stay. America has already done its worst, and we've survived it all. We've persisted, and come out on the other side, as Maya [*Cont. on 80*]

Billie Eilish WOULD LIKE TO REINTRODUCE HERSELF

To make her best album yet, the superstar had to revisit her past self and rethink everything

By Angie Martoccio
Photographs by Aidan Zamiri

BILLIE EILISH

BILLIE EILISH

Sand Pit

GUTTER PHOTO CREDIT

GUTTER PHOTO CREDIT

BILLIE EILISH IS AT THE BOTTOM OF A POOL, HELD down by a large black weight attached to her shoulders. She is not, to put it mildly, enjoying herself. "I was basically waterboarding myself for six hours straight," the 22-year-old superstar tells me later. "If I'm not suffering somehow, I don't feel good about what I'm doing."

Eilish is wearing baggy black pants beneath a pair of shorts, a button-down shirt over a thermal long-sleeve, a striped tie, arm warmers, a variety of silver rings, and a goth-studded bracelet, plus that anchor on her shoulders. She's been submerging herself over and over for two minutes at a time, holding her breath for the duration, while the photographer William Drumm snaps her sinking beneath a white wooden door. Her eyes are completely open during those 120 seconds, with no goggles or nose plugs to help.

We're at a soundstage in Santa Clarita, California, on a chilly, rainy February afternoon. Eilish is surrounded by a team of nearly 40 people. There's a stylist, her management, and caterers standing next to a table filled with snacks and ginger shots. There are men aiding her with an oxygen mask she uses between plunges, with one of them shouting "Three breaths away!" to count down to the moment she goes under. Maggie Baird, Eilish's mom, nervously sits at the edge of the pool, watching her daughter put her body through the kind of pain experienced divers would struggle with.

The point of all of this suffering? Eilish is shooting the cover for her third album, *Hit Me Hard and Soft* (out May 17). "If there's one thing about me, it is I will put myself through hell and back for the shot," she tells me. "I've always been like that, and I will continue to be like that. A lot of my artwork is painful physically in a lot of ways, and I love it. Oh, my God, I live for it."

Less than 48 hours ago, Eilish won Song of the Year at the Grammys for "What Was I Made For?," her delicate, devastating hit from the *Barbie* soundtrack. After the Grammys, she stayed up until 7:30 the next morning, crashed until one, ate some avocado toast, then dyed her hair completely black, saying goodbye to her red roots, in preparation for today's shoot.

It's been a weird stretch of time for Eilish. "What Was I Made For?" was way bigger than she anticipated; the past few months have been a blur of awards shows, and she's ready to disappear for a few months, till the album hits, at least. "Bro, nobody can get enough of me," she tells me. "Every second of every day is *Barbie, Barbie, Barbie, Barbie, Barbie,* which is great, but as soon as the Oscars are over and I lose, I'm going the fuck away. I'm literally gone."

But she doesn't lose: On March 10, she finds herself onstage at the Dolby Theater, accepting the award for Best Original Song – the same award she won in 2022 for "No Time to Die," from the last James Bond movie – and becoming the youngest double-Oscar winner in history. "I had a nightmare about this last night," she told the crowd. "I just didn't think this would happen. I wasn't expecting this. I feel so incredibly lucky and honored."

Unimaginably surreal moments like this have been happening to Eilish for a while now. At 17, she became a global sensation with *When We All Fall Asleep, Where Do We Go?,* the now-classic 2019 debut that exposed her fragile psyche and rawest feelings of insecurity. Eilish swept us into her dark universe, a realm where her gleaming blue eyes sobbed black ink, spiders scurried out of her mouth, and she grew ginormous, feathery wings so she could fall from heaven.

Hit Me Hard and Soft dunks us headfirst back into that universe, from the deepest wallows of depression to the exhaustion that comes with the world speculating about her every move. There are no arachnids where they shouldn't be, but getting in touch with her darker side has Eilish finally feeling like herself again. "I feel like this album is me," she says. "It's not a character. It feels like the *When We All Fall Asleep, Where Do We Go?* version of me. It feels like my youth and who I was as a kid."

> "This whole process has felt like I'm coming back to the girl I was [in 2019]. I've been grieving her."

Although 2019 felt like a whirlwind of madness at the time, she has found herself missing it. "It was the best time of my life," she says. "This whole process has felt like I'm coming back to the girl that I was. I've been grieving her. I've been looking for her in everything, and it's almost like she got drowned by the world and the media. I don't remember when she went away."

That was most likely in 2020, at the dawn of Covid. "I was with myself so much that I couldn't see myself objectively anymore," she says. "And then I dyed my hair blond and I immediately was like, 'Oh, I have no idea who I am.' " She recorded her second album, *Happier Than Ever,* in those confused months of lockdown. Its introspective, jazz-leaning songs got rave reviews, as did her glamorous dresses and new hairdo. But it lacked the incandescent brilliance of *When We All Fall Asleep,* and Finneas, her brother and closest collaborator, remembers the era as difficult and confusing. "In a weird way, that was a little like being in a tornado cellar, reading a cute little story," he says. "It was a coping mechanism of an album."

Eilish doesn't regret that era; she knows she had to try something outside of her comfort zone in order to come back to her younger self. "In some ways, growing on [*Hit Me Hard and Soft*] meant revisiting a lot of things," Finneas says. "I feel like this album has some real ghosts in it, and I say that with love. There's ideas on this album that are five years old, and there's a past to it, which I really like. When Billie talks about the era of *When We All Fall Asleep,* it was this theatricality and this darkness. What's the thing that no one is as good at as Billie is? This album was an exploration of what we do best."

Immersing herself back into that darkness, combined with experimenting with new sounds – from a string quartet to glittery dance-floor trance – makes *Hit Me Hard and Soft* Eilish's best album yet. She dabbled in belting on the title track to *Happier Than Ever,* but she brings it full-throttle here on several tracks, finally putting all those lame "She's just whispering" critiques to rest.

And now, after six hours in the water, the album has a cover. After the shoot wraps, Eilish proceeds to spend 20 straight minutes blowing her nose in her trailer. "It was just white snot blowing out, as if my insides were made of white goo," she tells me later. She heads to her parents' house and lies on their couch, finding she can barely walk. The weight has left bruises; her throat hurts; she finds it difficult to speak. She tries to ease her sinus pain with a nasal rinse. She washes her hair twice. She does a face mask and washes her ears in three cycles – first with hydrogen peroxide, then alcohol, followed by warm water. Then she eats some spicy food.

"Everyone was like, 'You should go home and take a nice bath,' " Eilish recalls. "I was like, 'I've been in water for fucking six hours!' " She takes one anyway, but not before noticing something weird in her parents' backyard. "I saw these string lights, and each light had a circular orb around each light, a full aura. I felt like I was high and drunk, and I hadn't slept in days. I was like, 'Mom, what do those look like to you? Are you seeing that?' She was like, 'What the hell are you talking about?' "

She goes to bed and passes out cold for nine hours – so unusually long for her that Maggie almost goes into her room to make sure she's OK. "I've never suffered that much post-shoot," Eilish recalls. "I've never been in so much pain in my life. All for the shot. That's what they say about childbirth. It was like 12 hours of horrible, agonizing pain for a lifetime of a great album cover. You know what I'm saying?"

AS A CHILD, Eilish's biggest fear was water. She has traumatic memories – the swimming instructor whose method was to put her under and wait for her to "figure it out," or the time she got sucked into the surf of the ocean and a lifeguard had to rescue her. She always found the courage to dive in, but for years, the very idea of swimming made her heart beat faster. And don't even get her started on whales.

"Oh, my God," she says. "How can anybody just accept that a whale exists, y'all? Those things are enormous. The noises they make. That shit is terrifying to me. *Ew!* Terrifying."

It's two days after the album-cover shoot, and the rain has barely let up in L.A. Eilish and I are at Finneas' home studio in Los Feliz, sitting in peach desk chairs at a console that's lit up a crystal blue. She seizes the keyboard to her brother's desktop. "I never learned to type because I wasn't that generation, and now I regret it," she says. "To be fair, my parents never taught me." In an effort to show me videos of the animals that influenced the album, she opens YouTube. "Wow!" she shouts. "Finneas doesn't have fucking Premium out here?"

Senior writer ANGIE MARTOCCIO *wrote the Olivia Rodrigo cover story last October.*

PHOTOGRAPHY DIRECTION BY EMMA REEVES. PRODUCED BY OBJECT & ANIMAL: EMI STEWART AND ALEX BRINKMAN, EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS; REESE LAYTON, CREATIVE PRODUCER; JAMI ARCEO AND EVAN THICKE, PRODUCERS — MOTION. STYLING BY SPENCER SINGER. TAILORED BY ANNA TELCS. HAIR BY BENJAMIN MOHAPI AT BENJAMIN SALON. MAKEUP BY EMILY CHENG AT THE WALL GROUP. MANICURE BY ERIN LEIGH MOFFET AT ART DEPARTMENT. PRODUCTION DESIGNER: GRACE SURNOW. LEADMAN: KEVIN LOPEZ. STUNT COORDINATOR: SARA BEKO. STUNT UTILITY: NATHAN KAYN. ECO SET REPRESENTATIVE: MAYA EL-HAGE. SET MEDIC: JOSE TONY BAUTISTA. OBJECT & ANIMAL PRODUCTION ASSISTANCE: DANIELLE DARLING, BEN NAKHUDA, IZZY STRAUSS, AND ISAAC FRIEDENBERG. DIGITAL TECHNICIAN: CALEB SHANE. PHOTOGRAPHIC ASSISTANCE: ANDRES CASTILLO AND SAÚL BARRERA. STYLING ASSISTANCE: JEMMA FONG AND RAY BRAUNGART. SET DRESSERS: EVELYN JIMENEZ, LEO JOHNSON, AND T. MARSH.

Eilish isn't able to find the video she's looking for, but her own descriptions are vivid enough: She imagined luminous, glowing sea creatures, and butterflies of such a deep blue that they appear black. One color, fueled by her synesthesia, lingered in her mind throughout the making of the album: blue.

"Dude, what's so interesting to me is that blue has always been my least-favorite color. Which is so stupid because my hair was blue for years," she says. "But I didn't mean for it to be – that was an accident. Somebody put too much toner in my white hair and suddenly it was lavendery-blue, and then I kept getting it blue, and then I was known as this blue-haired girl, and I fucking hated it. I went months and months trying to get the color out, and then I had this teal hair. But over the last couple of years, I've just been like, 'Wait, blue is so who I am at my core.' "

The title *Hit Me Hard and Soft* derives from a conversation she had with Finneas, when she mistakenly thought the name of a synth in Logic Pro was called Hit Me Hard and Soft. "I thought it was such a perfect encapsulation of what this album does," she explains. "It's an impossible request: You can't be hit hard and soft. You can't do anything hard and soft at the same time. I'm a pretty extremist person, and I really like when things are really intense physically, but I also love when things are very tender and sweet. I want two things at once. So I thought that was a really good way to describe me, and I love that it's not possible."

For now, her black hair is loosely tied back, revealing diamond-studded dollar-sign earrings. She's dressed entirely in black, including a T-shirt with a quote often attributed to Kurt Cobain: "No One Dies a Virgin, Life Fucks Us All." When Eilish swivels the chair around, the top of her new back tattoo – black chaotic lines that run down her spine – peeks from under her shirt. Later, she tells me she actually kind of enjoyed getting it. "That shit saved me in a way," she says. "I was shirtless the entire day, because it was my spine, and so I had no shirt and no bra on all day, and it forced me to get comfortable."

To the left of Eilish sits a Petrof piano. On top sits a cue card, saved from a 2021 *SNL* appearance, that reads "Hi, I'm Billie Eilish and I'll be the host and musical guest this week on Saturday Night Live." Finneas' setup also includes stacks of synthesizers, from a Sequential Prophet XL to a vintage Memorymoog, and a shelf of guitars both electric and acoustic. A Columbia gramophone in seemingly perfect condition sits near a velvet, terra-cotta-colored couch; by the door rests a limited-edition Xbox made in collaboration with Gucci. Beyond that is the bathroom, its walls covered in the platinum records he made with his sister.

Finneas says he had to name the studio for "antiquated" copyright purposes, so he settled on the Astronave, which means "spacecraft" in Spanish. He's worried it sounds "goofy and pretentious," but I assure him it's charming. It's fitting for the subtle touch of whimsy in the room, like the plastic banana and orange shakers, and an incense burner in the shape of a fried egg (the stick goes right through the yolk, obviously). Below a copy of Nick Hornby's *High Fidelity* is Doug Bierend's *In Search of Mycotopia: Citizen Science, Fungi Fanatics, and the Untapped Potential of Mushrooms.*

Finneas moved out of his parents' Highland Park home – made famous in R.J. Cutler's documentary *Billie Eilish: The World's a Little Blurry,* which chronicled Eilish's rise to fame – and built the Astronave in 2019. You would think living apart from his sibling would hurt the creative process, but Finneas says the distance actually improved their dynamic.

"At home, I always had this feeling of 'Should we be working?' " he says. " 'Should I tell her to come into my room and write a song, and so should I therefore not be playing a video game or FaceTiming my girlfriend?' So the delineation is nice. 'Come on over. Working or not, you're here and you know that that's why you came. And if we're not working, it's because we're uninspired and we're going to go play pickleball or whatever.' "

Eilish's gray rescue pit bull, Shark, hovers behind her, shaking his tail rapidly. He turns four tomorrow, and Eilish plans to celebrate with a birthday hike. But for now he's hanging here, waiting to be picked up by Eilish's assistant. "I know you had the most boring day of your life," she tells him.

> "I don't like singles from albums. This album is like a family: I don't want one kid in the room alone."

Shark is unable to be at Eilish's home right now because of an accident that occurred this morning. Eilish made a smoothie, but the mug shattered across the floor, with shards scattering through three different rooms. She was particularly proud of this smoothie – strawberry, blueberry, pineapple, and nondairy yogurt – which was going to accompany her two Beyond Meat Italian sausages. (Eilish was raised vegetarian and is a longtime vegan.)

(The mug that broke, by the way, was a gift from her friend Hailey Bieber. "I wouldn't be surprised if Billie's soul has been here a lot of times," Bieber tells me. "That's really how I feel about her. She has established herself as a once-in-a-generation artist, and that is something that's so special and so rare. I can't imagine that I'm not going to be rocking out to Billie still when I'm in my fifties and sixties. That's my girl.")

Shark makes a cameo on the record – you can hear him breathing and jangling his collar on one of the tracks – but he's not the only guest: *Hit Me Hard and Soft* features five people beyond the O'Connell siblings. They recruited their live drummer, Andrew Marshall, to record a layer of drums, and the Attacca Quartet, whom Finneas met while working on the score for Alfonso Cuarón's upcoming Apple TV+ series, *Disclaimer,* is also featured. The quartet's strings are the through line of *Hit Me Hard and Soft,* an intense yet delicate – you might say hard and soft – element that ties the 10 tracks together, with a string motif that bookends the album and also pops up in the middle.

Finneas joins us, taking a seat on the couch next to a Takashi Murakami rainbow pillow. They're about to play me the album, and they casually let me know I'm one of the first people to hear it – no one besides the Interscope team and two of Eilish's friends have experienced it. The deadline for mixing and mastering is a week away, so they plan on taking notes. "While you're hopefully enjoying it, we'll be sitting here grimacing, writing down what we think could be better about it," jokes Finneas.

Eilish and Finneas call *Hit Me Hard and Soft* "an album-ass album." It's not a concept record, but it is a self-consciously cohesive set of songs, inspired by auteurist works from the past 15 years or so, like Coldplay's *Viva La Vida,* Lana Del Rey's *Born to Die,* Tyler, the Creator's *Goblin,* Marina and the Diamonds' *Electra Heart,* and Vince Staples' *Big Fish Theory.* "I love being dropped into a universe on a person's album," Finneas says, "when you find a whole body of work that you love to listen to, top to bottom. I'm so much happier than when I hear a great song, when you're like, 'Oh, wow, I get to cook my whole dinner listening to this album.' "

I mention that album listening as an art form isn't really a thing these days – most kids experience songs one at a time. Or, as Finneas points out, not even a whole track: "We're not even at 'song' anymore," he says. "We're at the line from the second verse that blew up on TikTok. We're mostly watching content in vertical that was made an hour ago – some person telling you their thoughts about something from an hour ago." But he feels like old-school music listening is going to have a comeback, in the same way that cinema did last year with Barbenheimer. "Everything's a counter-movement to the movement," he says. "I think that's going to lead back to immersing yourself in an album. I really do."

This is also why Eilish isn't releasing a single from *Hit Me Hard and Soft.* "I don't like singles from albums," she admits. "Every single time an artist I love puts out a single without the context of the album, I'm just already prone to hating on it. I really don't like when things are out of context. This album is like a family: I don't want one little kid to be in the middle of the room alone."

As soon as they hit play, I realize Eilish is right. The opening track, the title of which I've agreed not to reveal, plays like a sister song to "What Was I Made For?" Eilish has talked about how she and Finneas experienced serious writer's block before coming up with the *Barbie* track, but what she hadn't revealed was that this album opener was born first – the catalyst to writing the hit. It carries the same sparse fragility as "What Was I Made For?," featuring Eilish's whispered vocals over a gorgeous melody. But the lyrics are even more devastating, as Eilish tackles the misconception that losing weight signifies happiness.

Directly after that is a complete 180 in both sound and subject content. It's a sexy, bass-heavy banger where Eilish is crushing on a girl so hard she likens sex with her to devouring a meal. Finneas remembers playing this moment for Interscope and witnessing the team shift in their seats. "What's funny about starting the album with [the opener] is that it is a total false promise," he says. "If you're remembering 'What Was I Made For?' and then you hear [it], you go, 'Oh, OK. I understand this world.' Then the drums come in [on the next track], and it really is the kill-the-main-character-type beat. It's like Drew Barrymore being in the first five minutes of *Scream* and then they kill her. You're like, 'They can't kill Drew. Oh, my God, they killed Drew!' "

A COUPLE OF WEEKS LATER, Eilish and I take Shark on a mile-long walk. At one point, we encounter an elderly woman retrieving her mail. She glances at Eilish's outfit – black skeleton sweatpants, a Biggie Smalls shirt, and a pair of black skate shoes that are a collaboration between Osiris and Fuck the Population. "I like your Halloween outfit!" she tells Eilish. The pop star thanks her, uncontrollably laughing as we pass. "Damn," Eilish says. "She got my ass!"

Even with a security team and her pit bull, Eilish has had frightening experiences, like stalkers who showed up to her home unannounced. Shark might be medicated with anti-anxiety meds like trazodone and Reconcile, but he knows his duty around Eilish: "Just because he's anxious doesn't mean he couldn't rip your face off if you come into my house," she says. It's the ugly part of fame – the downside that normal, nonfamous people rarely think about. I tell Eilish how sorry I feel for her, that these events sound like the plot of a horror film.

"Thank you, dude," she says, chuckling. "It's not in the job description, for sure. I had really scary things happen in my personal life and my safety was compromised a couple of times, and that's a big part of my life. That is something I just have to live with. But I don't know, it really made me resentful of my life, when you can't even be in your own house."

Eilish is trying to go out in public more. It's part of her effort to get her old self back – the *When We All Fall Asleep*-era Billie she's been chasing, whom she affectionately calls "2019 me." It also stems from last summer, when she suffered a bout of depression she describes as "realer than it's ever been." Later, she shows me a page in her journal, where she wrote two lines in all-caps: "I know I'm lucky/But I'm so unhappy."

"It was just realer than it's ever been before," she says. "My whole life, I've never been a happy person, really. I've been a joyous person, but not a happy person. I experience joy and laughter and I can find fun in things, but I'm a depressed person. I've suffered with a lot of depression my whole life. When things happen in my soul, or whatever, the thing I've always held on to is 'Well, it'll pass. It'll come in waves and it'll get worse and it'll get better.' And that's always brought me comfort. And this time, I literally was like, 'I don't care. I don't even want it to get better.' "

Eilish credits Maggie; her father, Patrick; Finneas; and Zoe Donahoe, her best friend since childhood, with keeping her afloat during this time. She realized one thing for certain: She had to get out of the house more. "I hit a turning point," she says. "I had this moment of like, 'Oh, my God, I haven't had fun in seven years.' Truly. I had this illusion that I had, because who experiences going to the Grammys at basically 17 and winning five? But in life, I realized I had really not experienced that much. I didn't go outside for five years. How was I supposed to have any experiences?"

She decided to start small: the grocery store. A year ago, she walked into Lassens, a natural-grocery chain in Los Angeles she hadn't been to since she was a child. She went to Erewhon, the celebrity grocery store, in Silver Lake. She saw Turnstile in concert. She went to Target, CVS, some thrift stores. She went to parties. She went with Donahoe to get ice cream, walking inside the shop instead of hanging back in the car like she normally does. And just the other night, she went to a book reading with Mustafa the Poet (she was late and didn't arrive until the end, but we'll count it).

"I'm afraid," she says. "For a fucking good reason. I'm afraid of people, I'm afraid of the world. It's just scary for somebody like me, and even if it's not scary, it means being on and being vulnerable and being seen and being filmed and whatever. But with that all in mind, I have been choosing to do the thing that scares me more. I am biting the bullet and existing in the world for once."

"We have talked about that a little bit, and I love that for her," says her friend Hailey Bieber. "When I look at someone like her or Justin, that's one thing that I don't necessarily relate to, because I was able to have a completely normal young-person experience. There's a lot of normal things they're never going to be able to experience. But I feel like everyone, especially young women, should have the opportunity to experience life and its ups and downs without constantly feeling like you're doing it in front of the world and somebody always has something to say about it. That's the only thing that sucks for Billie. But I give her a lot of credit for putting herself out there and for wanting to experience everything the way that she's meant to as a 22-year-old woman."

Eilish and Finneas were both struck by something John Mayer told them back in 2019, when her newfound fame was overwhelming: "I remember him saying, 'It feels like it's going to feel like that forever, but it will go away, and in a way you want to take it in, because it will cool off, and people won't act like she's Bigfoot when they see her,' " Eilish says. "That really stuck with me, because I was like, 'No, it is going to feel like this forever, and everywhere I go, people are going to look at me like they just saw a ghost.' "

Eilish says Mayer's prophecy hasn't totally come true yet, but she's hoping the shock of seeing her in public will subside the more she goes out. "If I do it right, I can exist," she says. Finneas uses Trader Joe's as an example: "If you go four times, somebody in the store is going to go, 'Oh, my God, I recognize that person.' And they're going to say that to their friend, and their friend's going to be like, 'Yeah, they're here all the time.' You normalize yourself, which is the right way to do it."

There had been another factor keeping her inside: By not going out, she remained an enigma. "That used to be a thing I would strive for," she says. "I used to be so obsessed with this mysteriousness, and I think that's 100 percent why I didn't make any friends, because I didn't want anyone to know me, because I wanted everyone to think of me as this mysterious, cool person. I loved the idea of people feeling that way, but then I thought, 'Oh, here I am sitting alone in my room, loving the feeling that everybody thinks I'm really cool, but I'm not actually getting anything out of that. I'm not enjoying anything in my life at all.' "

"I hit a turning point. I had this moment of like, 'Oh, my God, I haven't had fun in seven years.' Truly."

She had what she describes as an existential crisis at her 20th-birthday party. "I looked around the room and every single person was an employee of mine," she says. "I was like, 'Oh, shit, I literally don't have friends. I don't have people that see me as an equal. I don't have people that aren't afraid of me.' " She couldn't relate to songs that referenced friendship – the Beatles' "With a Little Help From My Friends," Lily Allen's "Smile" – and she says listening to them made her feel sick to her stomach.

Around this time, Zoë Kravitz would often ask Eilish to hang out, but Eilish would never follow through. Eventually, the actress called Eilish out on it. "I remember her being like, 'Why won't you hang out with me?' " Eilish recalls. "And I was like, 'Because when you get to know me, you're going to know me, and that's so terrifying to me, because then I'm not just, like, this person you think is cool. And what if you don't like me?' I was obsessed with the idea of being an anomaly, being this Billie Eilish character. Anyway, I have since thrown away that idea, and been hanging out with people. If they get to know me, that's OK. That's good."

Of all the "normal things" Eilish has been up to lately, one stands out: her recent trip to Chipotle, which she documented on Instagram in a selfie taken with two employees. "Wasn't that so cute?" she says. "I walked in and they're like, 'Why are you in here?' And I was like, 'Because I like it and I want food.' And they were like, 'But you could eat any food. You could have the best food ever. Don't you have somebody [who cooks]?' I'm like, '(A) No, I don't. I'm not bougie like that. And also, fucking Chipotle is fire.' "

It's important for Eilish to not appear bougie. She hates the idea that someone as wealthy as her should have a personal chef. "Can't we make a grilled cheese or something by ourselves?" she jokes. She owns an electric Porsche, but does not have a driver. She doesn't vacation very often ("Vacation is a scam," she says). And she certainly doesn't have a private jet. So what's the one bougie thing Billie Eilish does have? She pauses, taking a minute to think. "The bougiest thing I have ... um ..." Her lips form into a smile. "Money."

Eilish has always been an active person. She loves to work out – sometimes obsessively – and she recently got back into dancing, which was her primary creative outlet before she injured her hip at 13.

I ask her what she likes to do to decompress. "Sex," she says. "I basically talk about sex any time I possibly can. That's literally my favorite topic. My experience as a woman has been that it's seen in such a weird way. People are so uncomfortable talking about it, and weirded out when women are very comfortable in their sexuality and communicative in it. I think it's such a frowned-upon thing to talk about, and I think that should change. You asked me what I do to decompress? That shit can really, really save you sometimes, just saying. Can't recommend it more, to be real."

Eilish would also like a word about masturbation, which she says is equally taboo for women. Self-pleasure, she says, has made her more confident. "TMI, but self-pleasure is an enormous, enormous part of my life, and a huge, huge help for me," she says. "People should be jerking it, man. I can't stress it enough, as somebody with extreme body issues and dysmorphia that I've had my entire life."

Eilish likes to masturbate in front of a mirror. "Partly because it's hot, but it also makes me have such a raw, deep connection to myself and my body, and have a love for my body that I have not really ever had," she says. "I got to say, looking at yourself in the mirror and thinking 'I look really good right now' is so helpful. You can manufacture the situation you're in to make sure you look good. You can make the light super dim, you can be in a specific outfit or in a specific position that's more flattering. I have learned that looking at myself and watching myself feel pleasure has been an extreme help in loving myself and accepting myself, and feeling empowered and comfortable."

Eilish has been wanting to discuss this with me, and now that she's gotten it all out, she [*Cont. on 80*]

GLASSES AND EARRINGS BY CHROME HEARTS (WORN THROUGHOUT). SHOES: CUSTOM-MADE BY OSIRIS (WORN THROUGHOUT). PAGES 42-43: HAT: CUSTOM-MADE BY BENNY ANDALLO. SHIRT: VINTAGE SOUTH POLE. PANTS BY OLLY SHINDER. PAGES 44, 49, 54-55: T-SHIRT: VINTAGE THE JESUS AND MARY CHAIN. GLASSES BY OAKLEY. PAGE 45: JACKET AND SHIRT BY OLLY SHINDER. SHORTS BY PRO CLUB. PAGES 46-47, 53: T-SHIRT AND PANTS BY OLLY SHINDER. PAGE 48: SHIRT BY ASHLEY WILLIAMS X 54THEGATE. SHORTS BY OLLY SHINDER. SHOES: VINTAGE K2 SNOWBOARD BOOTS. PAGES 50-52: FACE MASK: CUSTOM-MADE BY STEFAN COOKE.

America's First

Olympic B-Boy

Victor Montalvo set out to be the best breaker in the world. Nobody ever thought that would mean going for gold

By Brandon Sneed

Photographs by Thalía Gochez

VICTOR MONTALVO DRIVES the most yellow vehicle in Los Angeles County, a 1987 Mitsubishi SUV he just purchased off of Craigslist. He pulls through the security gate at a sprawling Santa Monica office compound, parks, and removes a gold chain and ring he bought in India last year. The sunglasses stay on. Just back from Japan, he's jetlagged as hell. "I swear it's not a hangover," he says, chuckling. "Just feels that way." But alas, he must train.

You'd probably call Montalvo a break dancer; they call themselves "breakers" and what they do "breaking." The breaking world knows Montalvo as "B-Boy Victor" – they're all B-boys and B-girls – and he's one of the best that competitive breaking's ever seen. He's won every major breaking event that's existed, most of them multiple times. When he won the World DanceSport Federation Breaking World Championships last September, that qualified him as the United States' first-ever Olympic breaking representative.

The International Olympic Committee made the announcement in 2020: Breaking would be in the 2024 Paris Olympics, transforming what the sport means to the world and what's possible for its breakers. "It's fucking great," says David "Kid David" Schreibman from Los Angeles, a 35-year-old breaking icon and commentator for Red Bull's BC One competitions. "Because guys like Victor are making a living like I wish I could have.... That was my dream. We never got any of that. We had to be the fucking background dancers for Justin Bieber. Also cool, but not *this* cool."

However, Montalvo will be 30 years old in Paris, the upper limit of breakers' competitive prime. He's concerned. "The kids now are crazy," Montalvo says. "They're like, flying. Incredible stamina. I'm not the same as when I was younger. I'm not as fast, as strong. Maybe more creative. But it's getting tougher."

"Breaking has to be one of the hardest things in the world," Schreibman says. "You need the athleticism of a professional athlete, but you also need to be an artist, and you need to dance. It's like asking Picasso to mountain climb. That's what makes breaking so hard – that element of needing someone who's creative, but also has the highest athletic ability."

Hence the training, jet-lag be damned.

BRANDON SNEED *is an author and journalist. This is his first story for* ROLLING STONE.

After lunch, Montalvo goes to a state-of-the-art gym with cutting-edge equipment, high ceilings, and walls that open like doors, letting in the beautiful Southern California weather. A trainer appears. The workout begins. He goes for an hour, mostly core work. He does it right. The final exercise requires Montalvo to assume a modified plank position by holding one end of a barbell elevated by a 45-pound plate on it; the other, empty end is secured at floor level. Montalvo rolls the barbell to his right, controlling his body down to a halt parallel with the floor, then he raises himself back up by pulling the barbell back beneath him. He repeats this to his left.

Over the next week, almost every day will see Montalvo train, do interviews and photo shoots, and dance for hours. Many nights end with beers and mezcal shots. He has endless energy, like a soul determined to make full use of its body.

He's also quiet, humble, steady. "I have made it so far from where I started," he says. "Gold is the last possible thing to achieve. And this is probably my only chance."

Thing is, there was a point last year when Montalvo didn't think he'd make the Olympics. "I thought I'd lost it," he says, "wondering, 'Do I still got it?' "

Not long before that, burned out and grieving a sudden loss, Montalvo nearly quit competitive breaking for good. Getting here meant facing that pain again by leaning on lessons imparted by the man whose death he grieved.

MONTALVO'S PATH TO the Olympics began in 1999, when he was six years old and his father, Victor Sr., and uncle Hector watched the 1984 movie *Beat Street*. Hollywood's first motion picture about breaking, it featured Rock Steady Crew, the world's first professional breaking group; they'd first appeared in the 1982 documentary *Wild Style* and the 1983 film *Flashdance*.

Years prior, in Puebla, Mexico, when Victor Sr. and Hector first saw those movies on Betamax tapes, it was like they were charismatics struck by the Holy Ghost, dropping to the floor to copy the dance moves. They formed a breaking crew, found jams, battled other breakers, and by the mid-Eighties, traveled around Mexico competing and dreaming of winning global competitions in breaking's capital, New York City.

"Gold is the last possible thing to achieve," Montalvo says. "And this is my only chance."

The scene quickly died out in Mexico, however, leaving Victor Sr. and Hector to sate their artistic passions by starting a heavy-metal band. In time they made a new home, near their mother in Kissimmee, Florida, where Victor Sr. worked as a cook.

But now, watching *Beat Street* with his son, he saw the music and dancing do the same thing to his boy it had once done to him, young Victor's eyes glued wide to the screen. "You know," his father said, "I used to do that, too."

Then he did it again. He "mopped the floor" by popping up onto a shoulder with his head on the floor and his legs in the air and scooching along, and did a "windmill," spinning on his back and shoulders with his legs whirling toward the sky. And then he spun on his head. Montalvo remembers watching captivated. "Then I tried to do them," Montalvo recalls, "and I would just fall over. I just, like, threw myself. But I loved it."

Around that time, breaking underwent what one breaker called "a seismic leap" when Red Bull put on its inaugural Lords of the Floor event in 2001. LOTF treated breakers like professional athletes, covering travel costs for crews from all over the world, providing masseuses for dancers between rounds, and handing out $4,000 in prize money, then more than any other event. One breaker at the time said, "[It was] the first time B-boys were treated like rock stars."

By age 10, Montalvo "was obsessed," spending days on end with his cousin in the driveway or bedroom, dancing and spinning on cardboard.

Breaking has four core elements. "Top rock" refers to movements while standing. "Part of top rock" includes footwork – self-explanatory. "Down rock" means moves done on the floor. "Freeze" is any moment when a breaker, well, freezes, usually while holding an unusual position. Down rock is the most crucial element, comprising myriad movements including spins, footwork, transitions, and power moves in which breakers spin their bodies on hands, elbows, shoulders, or their backs or heads. They can appear to defy gravity and the laws of physics, the result of extraordinary athleticism and strength. The most recognizable power move is probably the air flare, in which breakers spin while upside down and balancing on one arm.

The first move Montalvo mastered was the windmill. He remembers the exact moment, in his cousin's bedroom, on a flattened cardboard box, when he got some momentum and launched himself to the floor on his shoulders and sent his legs flying in a circle. "It was the best feeling ever," he says. "Like, 'I got my first move.' "

Victor Sr. built his son a studio in the backyard, cobbling together money for supplies, then doing the labor himself with a friend's help. Montalvo practically lived in it.

One day a teacher handed out paper apples with a question: What do you want to be when you grow up? Montalvo wrote, "The best B-Boy in the world."

IN 2008, when Montalvo was 14, he went to his first major breaking event, Outbreak, in Orlando, organized by the legendary David "MexOne" Alvarado. "I saw so many breakers that were so different and original," Montalvo says. "They just had this dope aura around them."

He began sneaking out at night to go to jams with cousins and friends. "I knew they were sneaking out," Victor Sr. says. "I just didn't say anything.

◀ **Breaker Montalvo with his 1987 Mitsubishi SUV**

But I thought they were going to friends' houses or something. I didn't know sometimes they went to, like, freaking Miami."

Montalvo begged his family for travel money, consumed by the sport. "Once we started going to events and watching people dance, I'm realizing, 'Wow, I'm not that good,' " Montalvo says. "I need to go back and learn what they know. And from there, you start picking people's brains. 'How are you doing this?' 'How do you get this move?' And you just learn the culture, the essence of the dance…. My mind started going 'How did they get this way?' And that's when I got more curious about the culture side of the dance, and the roots of it."

Some researchers put breaking's roots centuries deep, dating back to warriors from the Angola region of Africa who performed similar dance movements as rituals to showcase agility, strength, and solidarity. Its modern evolution began in 1960s New York City, born out of the Bronx's burgeoning hip-hop culture – not as sport but as art, a blend of dancing, gymnastics, and martial arts. People dance-battled to settle conflicts. "Literally, gangs showing up to another gang's party," Schreibman says, "and they would literally dance it out."

They'd throw down with nothing between their skin and the street, art becoming scars. "People would get bald spots on their head," Montalvo says, remembering videos his father showed him as a boy. "It was a pride thing."

Nobody trained. Hell, most didn't even stretch. And as Montalvo entered breaking culture, he found many still did it that way.

"Some people still want to keep it, like, real hip-hop," Montalvo says. "Breaking on concrete. No stretching. No diet. Just get up and drink and smoke and break. And that's how I used to be."

AS A TEENAGER, Montalvo began developing his own style, flowing between air moves and freezes, relying on spontaneity more than choreography. He joined his first crew, the MF Kidz. "We would have these crazy all-day sessions," he says. "We'd get high and just get lost in the moment, and that's when we'd come up with just crazy shit. That's when we'd get most of our signature moves."

The music mattered as much as the dance moves, with the rapper Afrika Bambaataa and R&B-jazz-funk fusion group the Blackbyrds and the Godfather of Soul himself, James Brown, fueling young Montalvo's long days and nights in the studio. He'd feel the music moving his body, often leaving him little say in the matter.

He found his signature move in 2012, at age 17, one he was the first to ever do – the Supa Montalvo: dropping into a crouch on one hand and spinning in 360s, an otherworldly feat of athleticism and strength.

"I didn't know what the fuck I'd just done," Montalvo says. He watched the video footage. "Like, the fuck? I just spun on my one hand three times?"

It was around then that Montalvo won the Red Bull BC One Cypher in Tampa, Florida. That earned him invitations to competitions abroad. To do that, however, and devote more time to professional competition, he would have to quit school.

His mother, Maria Guadalupe Montalvo, and Hector told him he couldn't do it; Victor Sr. argued with them. "They are paying for the freaking plane tickets and the hotel," he reasoned. "I don't have money to give him that. They are going to make it so where he can travel to Europe. What the hell are you talking about he can't do it?"

They had a point: The odds of making a living breaking weren't good. Event winnings alone wouldn't cut it – competitions rarely gave prizes above four figures. Some breakers like Schreibman eked out a living stringing together corporate gigs and Hollywood work. Many took other jobs to pay bills.

"He's going to be a nobody," said Hector.

"You know what?" Victor Sr. said. "Fuck you. It's my son. It's not your freaking son."

Victor Sr. borrowed $500 from his father to get an expedited passport and to give his son some cash while abroad.

Montalvo asked his dad if he was sure this was right. "Hey, if something happens, and you don't make it, then you don't make it," Victor Sr. said. "But follow your fucking dreams."

BUT THE PATH was fraught. Once, a man claiming to be some sort of manager paid Montalvo's way to El Salvador to judge a competition. "I shouldn't have gone," says Montalvo, who adds that the man ended up trying to manipulate him into giving up opportunities – while doing free work for him. "But it was a free chance to see more of the world."

One trip to London ended as soon as Montalvo deplaned. He called his father in tears. Authorities had detained him in an airport holding cell for immigration-law violations after a misunderstanding over visa requirements. "I was so young, and they were so skeptical," Montalvo says. "They were like, 'Yo, what the hell are you doing coming here? You're only 17. Your parents are letting you come here by yourself?' And I didn't have

money.... I was in, like, immigration jail with people who'd been there for months and years."

Montalvo often attended competitions with no way home without prize money. "I never really thought about it," Montalvo says. "I didn't really have a plan. I just loved the movement. The way it made me feel, it was like my own world that I could tap into. I loved always reinventing myself and winning, and never really thought about the money. I just loved the art of it. And the money came naturally."

In 2013, at 18, Montalvo moved to Los Angeles. He stayed in a one-story home on Bundy Lane in Santa Monica, "the Bundy House." It rented for $3,000. Twelve people split it. And the Bundy House, Montalvo says, "was crazy." They all shared one bathroom and shower. And there were always guests. "People would just show up from Japan, Russia, Ukraine," Montalvo says. "Like, 'Yo, we come here to practice.' Just sleeping on couches. But then it was like a whole jam back here. We'd start at midnight and go until, like, noon, smoking, drinking, hanging out, dancing."

They were climbing a mountain as it formed. That year, the World DanceSport Federation held its first breaking world championships, further validating the sport.

Breaking's fan base swelled. Events drew tens of thousands. Gyms filled. Livestreams pulled hundreds of thousands of viewers. Breakers began signing modest sponsorship deals.

After performing admirably, in 2014 Montalvo was invited to join Squadron, a one-of-a-kind bicoastal crew founded by Schreibman and Alvarado. "He's an all-arounder," says Luis "Luigi" Rosada, a 37-year-old Squadron member. "He's really hard to beat. He can flip, power, spin, footwork. He can do it all. He's a perfect recipe for competition."

"There's a level to Victor that's super dangerous," Schreibman says. "His pace. His efficiency with his energy. Compare it to boxing. Victor doesn't do huge knockouts all the time. He's great at jab, jab, jab, jab."

The best competitive breakers find ways to surprise judges and opponents while remaining consistent, requiring a nearly-impossible balance between steady practice to refine and maintain one's abilities, and forever reinventing oneself. "I just don't think there's another competitive breaker who is as consistent and has the full package and can deliver it the way he does," Schreibman says.

But heartbreak conquers all. In 2015, breaking up with a longtime girlfriend left Montalvo feeling lost and depressed. Alvarado helped him course-correct, taking Montalvo to competitions by way of road trips, creating hours of conversation and mentorship.

An undocumented immigrant when he arrived to the States who later acquired his green card, Alvarado built Orlando's breaking culture, grew Outbreak into a global series of significant events, and became one of breaking's most iconic figures. Having grown up in the same area, and then taking him under his wing, nobody influenced Montalvo more. "He was telling me, 'You're going to be winning all of these amazing events, you're going to be winning 20 grand here and 20 grand there,' " Montalvo says. He had his doubts. "That's so much money," he says. "I just didn't see me breaking at that level."

Alvarado argued otherwise. "He's the one who told me what could happen," Montalvo says. "He programmed me with this belief. 'Dog, you've already done it once.' I've beaten these people. 'So you can do it again.' And then everything he said was going to happen came into real life."

Suddenly, Montalvo experienced success the likes of which no breaker ever had. "That year," Rosada says, "he won everything."

The Red Bull BC One America Finals in his home region of Orlando. The inaugural Silverback Open in Philadelphia and the largest single-event prize – $15,000 – in breaking. The Freestyle Session World Finals in California. Then came the Red Bull BC One World Final in Italy, where Montalvo won a world title, becoming what he wrote on that apple when he was 10, the best B-boy in the world.

"Breakers just don't really go on winning streaks like that," says Schreibman. "It's so hard to put together back-to-back wins. But then this kid was winning everything."

"This guy made over 100 grand off jams," Rosada says. "This is the new thing. Vic was one of the first ones to do it.... [Alvarado] saw it with him."

Montalvo gave his championship belt to his father; that made him cry. The belt still hangs in Victor Sr.'s bedroom.

IN 2016, MONTALVO met Kate Pavlenko, "B-Girl Kate," in New York. An athletic, blue-eyed, brown-haired breaker from Ukraine, she had won a number of regional events and held her own near the top of the ranks worldwide. They bonded over a shared love of jazz and funk music. They grabbed drinks, went dancing, and spent days on end together.

When Pavlenko visited Montalvo in Los Angeles, they escaped the cramped conditions in the house by sleeping in a boat parked in the driveway. Later that year, when Montalvo returned home to Kissimmee to visit family, she went with him. "I loved his heart," she says. Much like Montalvo, Pavlenko speaks with a calm warmth, smiling often and choosing her words carefully. "He is a very kind person, and very easygoing. It felt easy to communicate with him, even though English is not my first language. I thought we were going to have a language barrier, but we didn't."

"He's hard to beat," Rosada says. "He can flip, power, spin, footwork. He can do it all."

In August 2017, Montalvo and Pavlenko went on a road trip with Alvarado from Florida to Tennessee. "We were talking, he was on the phone watching *Superbad,* just laughing like crazy," Montalvo says.

A month later, Montalvo woke up to the news that Alvarado had passed away. Montalvo had just seen his friend a few weeks before – telling me about this loss, he has few words for it, like he still feels the heartbreak. "It was just so shocking," he says, shaking his head.

MONTALVO FINISHED 2017 as the top breaker in the world again, but losing Alvarado hit hard, and competitive breaking's relentless grind got old. "Everyone knows me and knows my moves and what I can do," he recalls. "I used to never practice for competition. I just did it because I loved it. Now I'm practicing for competition instead of just dancing and enjoying. It was getting exhausting."

"It's rough," says Schreibman. "Every other weekend, you're in an arena, and a guy's standing 100 feet away from you, and he's gonna do the same moves you saw last weekend, the music's gonna be the same as the weekend before."

How many times can you become a new you?

Creating further strain: Montalvo had become a full-fledged global celebrity in the breaking world, now with hordes of fans. A 2018 China visit left him disturbed when a group of breaking fans manhandled him as he left an event. "Grabbing me like I was a piece of meat," he says.

Then Covid hit, forcing a break from everything. He went hiking, mountain biking, snowboarding, surfing. He moved back home to Kissimmee, bought a house, and renovated it with his dad and family. Being back home felt good. But he missed Pavlenko, who was locked down in Ukraine. As soon as he could travel, he went there for four months. They traveled Russia together. He trained in muay thai and boxing. He mulled following the well-trod path of breakers past: go Hollywood, work music videos, commercials, movie deals, background dancing gigs, that sort of thing. It was viable.

"I've been doing it for 20 years," he says. "I was definitely just over it ... was like, 'I'm doing the Hollywood thing.' "

Then came news from the International Olympic Committee that breaking would be included in the 2024 Paris Olympics.

One hell of a plot twist.

"I'd never really watched the Olympics," Montalvo says, "other than 2012, London, watching Usain Bolt."

But he could see it now. The opening ceremonies, the global stage, medals around necks, a gold one around his. Sponsors connected him with Olympians past who shared the pride of representing home and country to the world, and taught him what opportunities awaited after a podium. "That inspired me," Montalvo says. "I said, 'OK, this makes it interesting again.' "

RETURNING TO COMPETITION went well enough at first, so well that Montalvo again won the Red Bull BC One World Finals in 2022, claiming another belt. Through the first half of 2023, however, Montalvo entered three separate Olympic-qualifying events, and finished in third place each time. Doubt arose. "I didn't know if I could make it," he says. "I gave myself all this pressure."

Going into the World DanceSport Federation Breaking World Championships in Belgium, one of the last remaining Olympic-qualifying events,

Montalvo with his mom, Maria, and dad, Victor Sr., who encouraged him to pursue breaking. Victor Sr. grew up breaking in Puebla, Mexico, after watching Betamax tapes of the documentary *Wild Style* and the movie *Flashdance*.

As a kid, Montalvo would sneak out of his house to attend breaking competitions with friends.

Montalvo had a near nervous breakdown. Everything felt off.

Montalvo remembered Alvarado. "I told myself what he would've told me," Montalvo says. " 'Dog, you won so many countless events, international events. You did it all before. You can do it again.' "

Montalvo and Pavlenko ran to a store to get what he liked – flat, white skater-style Adidas – but they didn't have his size. On their way out of the store, Pavlenko saw a mannequin wearing the shoes Montalvo wanted, but they were a size-and-a-half larger than Montalvo normally wore.

"She forced me to put 'em on," Montalvo says. But when he put on the bigger shoes they felt good. "Ended up being the perfect size."

Montalvo became ... not like his old self, exactly, but a new version, reinvented once again. Maybe he couldn't get high before the competition, but he found that place in his mind, letting go and dropping into the moment, opening his body to go where the music led.

He felt good. This carried him through round after round until the final competition scores were announced, and Montalvo had claimed the title and his spot in this summer's games in Paris.

Montalvo remembered being 10 years old and spending all day in a backyard studio, when the Olympics were never even a thought, a dream beyond a dream.

"I think I've surprised myself," he says. "I'm like, 'Damn, I can't believe I've been able to do this.' "

IT WILL HAPPEN at Place de la Concorde on the Champs-Élysées. Montalvo will be one of two B-boys representing the United States through 16 rounds of one-on-one competition over two days. Day One will be a round-robin tournament, by the end of which eight will remain. Day Two will unfold in a seeded tournament format, culminating in breaking's first Olympic medals.

For those who've come before Montalvo, this moment brings mixed emotions.

"I'm low-key kinda jealous," says Rosada. "I've definitely had my bitter moments about it. I put in all this work, and this younger generation is reaping the benefits of it."

Then there's the diluted nature of Olympic competition. It will all be one-on-one, with little reflection of breaking's rich history of crew battles, let alone its origins in hip-hop culture. That's another thing: Public competitions can't use popular hip-hop music without paying expensive licensing fees, and the Olympics won't confirm whether or not they'll splash out for them. There's a chance the competitions will be held using stock beats.

"That's one of the hardest things," Montalvo says. "We fell in love with the dancing because we fell in love with the music. But when we compete we don't have the music we fell in love with, that made us dance at first."

"Some of the heart and soul is gone," Schreibman says. "My fear is that people are going to see a bunch of people onstage dancing to mechanical music and think that's breaking, and that's not what's really awesome about this culture.... That's the counterculture side people don't see unless they go out and see it.

"The hours in the garage with your friends, playing these classic hip-hop records, creating movement that started in your brain and now it's in the world in raw form. That's what makes breaking beautiful."

Montalvo agrees. He invites me to the Bundy House.

I PULL UP TO the curb behind the yellow SUV and meet Montalvo in the driveway. The boat's still right there. Beyond, a gate; beyond that, an open garage. Graffiti covers the garage walls, along with signatures from countless visitors who've passed through. A couch and chairs line the walls; the middle stays clear, covered by padded flooring. Jose "Seize" Rivera spins R&B and funk records and smokes a spliff; he wears a black vest repping the crew he was born into back in the Bronx, the Mighty Zulu Kingz. David "Illy" Bennett, an MF Kidz founding member, now an actor and model who still performs with the L.A. Breakers on Venice Beach, breaks in slow, smooth moves. A dozen other people mingle throughout the garage and backyard, smoking and drinking.

Montalvo has his own place now, including a garage, but he still comes here most days.

He sheds his coat and jewelry and checks the laces on his shoes. Same ones he wore to win worlds and make the Olympics. Then he takes his turn. He eases in with some light footwork and bobbing of the head and shoulders, like a boxer getting loose, then he moves. A windmill. A freeze with his legs in a position akin to a soccer kick. A Supa Montalvo. He stops after a couple of minutes. There's light clapping. A toddler high-fives him.

Soon Pavlenko arrives, wearing baggy gray sweats and a navy hoodie. She pulls her hair back into a ponytail and gets in the mix.

People of all ages flow in and out of the center, moving with the rhythms of the hip-hop tracks thumping through the speakers. The toddler attempts imitation, to moderate success but much fanfare. "That's it right there, baby," Montalvo says. "That's how it starts!"

This goes on for hours. Dancing, drinking, smoking, gassing each other up. It's the breaking version of sandlot baseball, of pickup hoops at the park, of a day at the beach with a board and good break. Then it's time to hit a nearby dive bar for dinner, darts, and pool, and a nine percent Belgian beer called Delirium Tremens, then shots of mezcal.

The next few days with Montalvo unfold in kind. Training, Bundy House breaking, drinks with friends. A quiet happy hour at the Misfit in Santa Monica turns into mezcal-fueled competition at another bar with shuffleboard and Pop-A-Shot and claw machines.

A trip to a club ends with a bouncer refusing entry. Something about dress codes and Victor's oversize breaking pants. We've had enough mezcal that this could become a somewhat dramatic situation; the bouncer seems to sense this, perhaps invite it. Montalvo laughs. We hit another bar. When everyone else calls it a night, Montalvo wants to keep going. We make for Venice, where we close down the Brig.

"You ever get tired?" I ask.

He laughs.

"I am now," he says, but he doesn't mean the night. Every day's a new interview, photo shoot, TV spot to film.

"It's good," he says. "But not really my thing. I'm ready to focus on just dancing again. That's all what it's about. I don't really care about money or people knowing me or things like this. It's about the people, the culture, the dance, you know?

"It's about that garage."

PREVIOUS SPREADS: PHOTOGRAPHIC ASSISTANCE BY MARIA ROMERO. LIGHTING TECHNICIAN: MIABELLA CHAVEZ. THIS PAGE: COURTESY OF VICTOR MONTALVO, 2

THE UGLY TRUTH ABOUT

THE WILD ANIMALS

Many of the thrilling photographs of bears, wolves, and tigers on your social media feeds are taken at game farms — places critics say are the exotic-animal equivalent of puppy mills

BY RENE EBERSOLE

OF INSTAGRAM

SCROLLING THROUGH FACEBOOK

one day in October 2017, wildlife photographer Melissa Groo seethed when she saw Heather Keepers had posted another image to Instagram of herself kissing a cougar, with the hashtags #coolestjobintheworld, #luckiestgirlintheworld.

Keepers, petite with long brown hair, blue-green eyes, and tattoos of constellations on her arms, was the face of an industry Groo despises: photography game farms, where captive exotic animals are kept to model for photo shoots. For nine years, Keepers was the head trainer at one of the nation's top photography ranches, Triple D Wildlife in Kalispell, Montana.

Triple D's animals have starred in films produced by National Geographic, Disney, *Nature,* and the BBC, according to the company's website. They've also posed for calendars and ads, and they appear in countless Instagram posts. In a five-day workshop costing about $900, Triple D clients, ranging from professionals to amateurs and artists, can photograph more than a dozen animals, including grizzlies, cougars, bobcats, and wolves. Keepers trained the animals to leap over logs, stand perfectly still, and howl on cue. "You couldn't have gotten these shots in the wild," owner Jay Deist likes to tell his customers.

That's exactly Groo's point – such picture making is the antithesis of nature photography. She would know. Groo's an acclaimed photographer and conservation advocate whose work has graced the covers of environmental magazines. Nearly six feet tall with long blond hair and usually toting a camera lens the size of a small howitzer, Groo is soft-spoken and deliberate. She will sit with her camera for hours at the edge of a pond patiently trying to capture not only an image of a great blue heron on the hunt for a fish, but also the bird's very essence. For roughly a decade, she has worked to expose the deceptiveness of game-farm photography and advocated for ethical standards and transparency in publishing. "This business is polluting the whole landscape of wildlife photography," Groo says. "They're taking away from the work of authentic photographers."

What's more, she claims, there's a "dirty secret" behind many of those cute animal images that show up on your Instagram feed. She alleges that Triple D – like many game farms – is a cruel place for animals. Groo says the game farms' animal models – including the ones at Triple D – are kept in small, filthy cages; some of the menagerie exist purely for breeding, supplying pups and kittens for popular baby-animal photography workshops; and once those babies have served their purpose, they're regularly sold to exotic-pet buyers on the internet, or worse, to fur farms. "These despicable places breed and dump animals, like the exotic version of puppy mills," Groo says.

Keepers, on the other hand, defended the farms and her work, saying they provided a rare up-close opportunity for people who aren't physically or financially able to go on a safari or camping trips to photograph animals. She and Groo were often on opposite sides of the debate online, but they shared a love for animals.

After college, Keepers took a zookeeping course at Cat Tales Wildlife Academy in Colbert, Washington, because she always dreamed of working with big cats and bears. She likes to give the wolves in her care nose kisses, admits she'd rather baby-talk to a 600-pound grizzly than put up with most humans, and keeps herself trim and fit enough to run alongside a tiger while training it with a treat.

For many years, Keepers defended Triple D's business practices, and often sparred with Groo in the comments of her accusing Facebook posts. But something changed in the summer of 2020. Suddenly, Keepers stopped boasting about her #coolestjobintheworld.

On Aug. 27, she sent Groo a private message:

Hello Melissa. As I am not a big fan of yours, this message is difficult for me to send … While you and I are not friends, we do have a common enemy … for slightly different reasons, but also for many of the same. Triple D.

My time spent there was heaven and hell all wrapped in one. I loved those animals more than anyone could love anything. And I gave them the best I could with what I was provided with. I worked there for 9 years under the false pretense that I would soon be taking it over. I held onto that idea Bc I wanted to change so much of what it was. And is. Many things you are wrong about but many things you are right about.

I will not disclose any information to you yet. Other than I have ENDLESS information and evidence and knowledge of evidence of many things. Illegal, unethical, and just absolutely morally wrong and dishonest.

My goal in reaching out to you is simple. Those animals need to be "saved" from Jay Deist. Those animals deserve so much better. And especially now that I'm not there to provide half of what they deserve, a lot of them are now just sitting and rotting. Some have even died suddenly since I left…. I am obviously desperate to save them. And well … it'll take someone who hates the Triple D as much as I do to do that. And I don't mean some animals and then Jay can get more. I mean ALL animals. And his operation stops entirely. Forever.

Is this something that interests you?

Groo responded, "Absofuckinglutely."

Both women and two additional former-employee whistleblowers would soon be slapped with lawsuits from Deist, who charges in ongoing litigation that they've damaged his business and wrecked his reputation. Deist declined multiple requests to be interviewed for this article and refused to answer a lengthy list of fact-checking questions, but in letters to his clients he maintains that his facility is a haven for wildlife that prides itself on the care and health of animals. "These wild, baseless allegations are false and reflect the complete lack of credibility in all of these former Triple D employees' and associates' social media statements about the Triple D facility," says a letter from a law firm representing the Deists. "The Triple D is committed to its mission of providing excellence in animal care and welfare."

"They're trying to cover their butts," says Keepers, who has been tracking animals – leopards, mountain lions, and a tiger – that she believes are being "offloaded" to animal sanctuaries, roadside zoos, and collectors because Triple D no longer has a place for them.

"They're not animal lovers," Keepers says of the Deists. "In their brains, they think they are, but they're not." To them, "animals don't have emotions or souls – they're just a commodity."

YOU'VE SEEN the pictures – maybe you've even shared them with Instagram friends: A close-up of a wolf in the snow staring straight into the camera, a cougar leaping across a rocky chasm, a baby bobcat perched on a log framed with daisies. Many of those stunning animal images only simulate "wild." The scenes are staged for customers paying for photo sessions with elusive animals that could take a photographer like Groo weeks, months, or even a lifetime to capture in the real wilderness. At game farms and off-site locations, trainers can get the wolves to howl or a cougar to leap on command with a scrap of raw meat.

These animal photographs represent a multi-million-dollar business in stock photography and films. Photojournalist Chris Johns, who was *National Geographic*'s editor-in-chief from 2005 to 2014, says he knows photographers who made thousands selling game-farm-animal pictures, but adds the truly great photos don't come from these shortcuts. Johns says no photographers should have any illusions about the industry or their role in it: "Make no mistake," he says, by supporting places with questionable animal welfare, "you're exploiting the animals."

While the market isn't as robust as it once was, today a crisp, large-scale bobcat picture still sells

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RENE EBERSOLE *has written for "The Washington Post," "Audubon," and "National Geographic."*

for nearly $500 on Getty Images' website. Those stock pictures in turn appear in magazines, calendars, children's books, and lucrative advertising campaigns. U.K. photographer David Yarrow's 2015 photograph titled "The Wolf of Main Street," featuring a wolf prowling a bar in Virginia City, Montana, reportedly sold at a Sotheby's auction for $100,000.

Yarrow, who has taken a lot of heat for using game-farm animals in his past work, is quick to point out that film and TV have been much bigger supporters of the industry. Even some conservation organizations use game-farm photographs in their fundraising ads, says Groo – those images are cheap compared with assigning a photographer like her to take pictures in the wild. "I can't imagine they don't care," she says. "I think they just don't know. For me, it's like putting an image of a trafficked sex slave on the cover of a women's-rights magazine. It's so wrong. Behind that glossy cover is an abject tale of an animal's life of deprivation, living in filth in cramped quarters."

In the wake of high-profile scandals, increased regulation, and shows like *Tiger King*, it seems only one photography game farm in the country has largely avoided bad publicity about wild-animal welfare: Triple D. It was founded over four decades ago by a former Montana state game warden, Lorney Deist, whose 1950s adventures hunting down mountain lions made newspapers, and his two sons – the three D's. The D's had planned to breed and likely sell Northwestern animals. But shortly after Triple D opened, a movie company contacted them wanting to film wolverines, and they wound up in the entertainment business instead.

Today, Deist's son Lorney, who goes by Jay, is the current owner of Triple D. With a silvery-white mane and a mustache, Jay, 77, and his second wife, Kim, 63, are both retired U.S. Forest Service law-enforcement agents. They promote the ranch as a place that "prides itself on the care and health of our animals, as well as preserving endangered species, so that they may be enjoyed by future generations."

Some former employees describe the Deists as kind and generous people – the type of folks who would buy their workers Christmas presents and take them along on family vacations. Others say Jay's sweet, fatherly persona masks a hot temper and intolerance for anyone who questions his authority.

"They're not animal lovers," Keepers says of the Deists. "They think they are, but to them, animals don't have emotions or souls — they're a commodity."

Guests coming to the Deists' 50-acre ranch, sandwiched between the Whitefish River and a suburban neighborhood of one- and two-story houses, most with pickup trucks in the driveways, enter the property through a log archway decorated with metal bear sculptures and the name "Triple D."

Triple D features a roughly 1,100-square-foot home, rustic rental guest cabin, a shop and conference area containing one wall decorated with the skin of a six-year-old grizzly named BJ, and metal-roofed buildings filled with caged animals that include bobcats, mountain lions, wolves, and a bear named Bruno. "Magic" is how some clients posting on Triple D's Facebook page describe their experience.

For a long time, Triple D "seemed above reproach," Groo tells me. "Everyone who went there was like, 'Their animals are so well-loved, and the trainer there, Heather, is so amazing with the animals. She loves them and takes such good care of them.' Of course, no one was ever allowed to go see how the animals lived, and Heather was hiding these awful truths."

Groo discovered that the Deists had been cited by the U.S. Department of Agriculture in October 2013 for declawing a female tiger cub named Hershey when she was two months old. The practice of declawing big cats was banned by the USDA in 2006. Animal-welfare activists say it's akin to an amputation surgery that involves removing the bone up to the first knuckle, causing acute and chronic pain that can result in the inability to do basic natural behaviors, including walking.

What's more, Groo found a shocking document indicating that there had been concerns about animal welfare at Triple D dating back to 2003. The report, titled "Cruelty to Animals at the Triple D Game Farm," was prepared by a private-investigation company called RSJM Enterprises. It includes statements from three former Triple D employees detailing a hidden animal-breeding area called "the Back 40" on the Deist compound, where they said animals were concealed from government inspectors. In emails enclosed in the report, one past employee said animals were being kept in squalid conditions. Another said animals born at Triple D were held until the following spring, when their "coats were in peak condition," and then killed for their pelts to "make room" for more babies.

For years, Heather Keepers worked for the Triple D ranch as a trainer and defended its practices — now she's the ranch's fiercest critic.

Groo couldn't believe what she was reading. "The truth was worse than I had even imagined," she says. "I felt absolute horror. It made me more committed to educate people about game farms."

I tried to track down the former employees who gave signed statements during the investigation. One woman, Susan Parodi (formerly McGee), agreed to talk. She says she doesn't remember how long she worked at Triple D – maybe six months – but she does "remember vividly the things she saw."

"The first thing I noticed was the conditions that some of the animals were living in," Parodi says, alleging that many of the animals in the Back 40, a wooded area tucked away near the river's edge, were in a collection of wire cages suspended on stilts. "No animal that has paws should be forced to walk on wire all day long with no support underneath," she says. "That was really prevalent." She remembers a bobcat whose foot had become infected from walking on the wire. She was putting antibiotic drops in the cat's food, but she alleges that Deist told her to stop. "He told me I couldn't keep wasting money giving the cat antibiotics to help heal her foot," she says. "She ended up passing away."

Parodi says the incident that made her quit involved a mountain lion named Anna, her two kittens, and another Triple D employee. She alleges that she was asked to hold one of the kittens as the employee went into the enclosure and removed the other from its mother. "Anna is screaming and crying, and he put the kitten out in the snow and shot it in the head," she says. "To give it to a taxidermist."

"That was it for me," she says. "I was like, 'OK, I'm done.' "

PREVIOUS SPREAD, FROM LEFT: KATHLEEN REEDER WILDLIFE PHOTOGRAPHY/GETTY IMAGES; COURTESY OF HEATHER KEEPERS. THIS PAGE: BECKY LICHENSTEIN

Parodi charges that when she told Deist why she was quitting, he said, "Oh, you know, animals die, and we have to cull the herd."

When Deist learned that ROLLING STONE had a copy of the RSJM report, his publicist sent us an email stating that the "report was the basis for a lawsuit in federal court that was dismissed decades ago as baseless." The Deists, through their publicist, maintain that the report is "filled with false and malicious information."

Parodi says she had to seek therapy for the nightmares she had about her short time at Triple D and would testify in court about her experience, if asked. No government action ever came of the accusations in the report, and for the next 18 years, Triple D's USDA routine inspections – all conducted by the same agent – were nearly pristine. The only exception during that time frame was the illegal tiger declawing, for which Deist received an official warning, but suffered no fine or repercussions.

Heather Keepers, who was involved in reporting the declawing to the USDA, tells me that in almost a decade working for Deist, she never personally witnessed animals being intentionally killed. However, she alleges, Deist tried to persuade her to shoot a deer that got injured while at a photo location. "His explanation was I needed to be able to shoot 'my' leopard, or whatever, if it got out or was attacking someone," Keepers recounts. The Back 40 was no secret during her time at Triple D, she says, but she's embarrassed that she put a good face on the conditions in which the animals lived. More than half, she says, "never left their pens – never saw outside." They were kept in cages for no other purpose than to produce babies.

Keepers grew up in Arizona, the youngest of five children in a family where both parents were U.S. Marines. Even when she was in fourth grade, she dreamed of one day working with big predatory animals. Prior to joining the Triple D staff in 2011, she used her zookeeper education to land a job as a tiger trainer at New Jersey's Six Flags, where tigers performed – running, leaping, climbing, swimming – in a big-stage cat show. "It was a multimillion-dollar facility with seven trainers for seven tigers," Keepers tells me. But when Six Flags filed for bankruptcy, they cut the tiger show. Keepers, then 28, needed a new job, and Triple D was hiring.

Looking at Triple D's website, she was wowed by the variety of animals and all of the gorgeous landscapes she remembers seeing in the pictures – snow-covered mountains, rocky canyons, cliff sides, and shady forests. She thought it would be a dream job, allowing her to continue to pursue her passion working with big predators. She was encouraged to read on Triple D's website that the company was committed to the care and health of its animals.

She flew out to Montana for an interview. The Deists seemed "sweet," she recalls, but the visit was disappointing. At Triple D, she says, there were roughly only three full-time caretakers for more than a hundred animals, and those same people had to transport and train the animals to perform in photo shoots nearly every day. The chain-link-fence enclosures were cramped and had dirty concrete floors, she says. And it bothered her that animals didn't have access to natural outdoor areas, except if they were performing. She was surprised to learn that Triple D was still

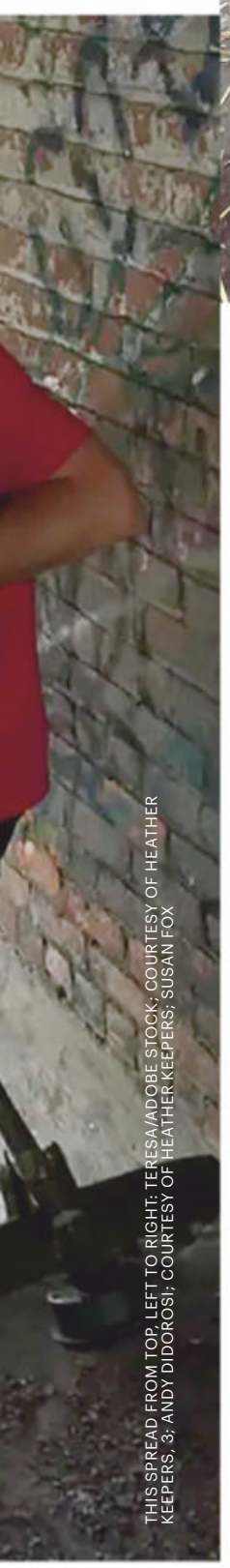
▲
A mountain lion named Kali photographed at the Triple D ranch, looking like she's on the hunt.

►
The reality of Kali's life at Triple D, confined in a cage with her sister Khia, who Keepers says has since died. In a 2003 report, one former employee alleges animals were being kept in squalid conditions. When wildlife photographer Melissa Groo read the report, she was stunned. "The truth was worse than I had even imagined," she says.

▲
Deist is a former U.S. Forest Service agent. The ranch's website states that Triple D "prides itself on the care and health of our animals, as well as preserving endangered species, so that they may be enjoyed by future generations."

►
Exotic animals can create problems for their handlers at photo shoots. Like in 2015, when this tiger got loose in a Detroit factory. A man at the scene tried to corral it with a tarp and a weed wacker.

◀
The bloody paw prints of a tiger named Hershey, one of Keepers' most beloved animals. In an unrelated incident, the Deists were cited by the USDA in October 2013 for declawing a female tiger cub by the same name. The practice of declawing big cats was banned by the USDA in 2006. Later, the Deists sent Hershey to the Exotic Feline Rescue Center in Indiana, where more than 100 big cats and other animals live on 260 rural acres.



▶
The infected paw of a porcupine named Elvis at Triple D. According to Keepers, the paw was burned and infected from living on straw soaked with urine.

▼
Guests visit Triple D, where handlers use meat to trigger animals' natural predatory instincts. A wolf, tiger, or mountain lion appear to be on the hunt in their natural habitat — but it is in reality a staged event.

THIS SPREAD FROM TOP, LEFT TO RIGHT: TERESA/ADOBE STOCK; COURTESY OF HEATHER KEEPERS, 3; ANDY DIDOROSI; COURTESY OF HEATHER KEEPERS; SUSAN FOX

declawing cats; she claims the Deists told her they didn't know about the law.

Still, she felt she'd found her new home. "This is what I was called to do in life," she thought. "To make this place better." She says she accepted the job in hopes of being a "positive influence."

Triple D's clients were impressed with how well Keepers trained the animals to hit their marks – stand on a specific place on command – in exchange for meaty treats, kisses, and "I love you"s. Most often, the main photography goal was to make the animals appear as if they were behaving as they would in their natural habitat. The clients wanted "wild eyes," Keepers says, so she would tie an elk hide on a 10-foot pole to stimulate the tiger's predatory instinct to chase – "like a mouse on a string for a house cat."

She says people would sometimes ask questions about where this wolf or that tiger lived and whether they got outside enough, but she says she deflected them because she didn't want to lie. There were a lot of animals with illnesses that could have been prevented with swift veterinary care, she says, but "it's cheaper to buy a baby than to pay for the vet bills." She secretly hoped that a USDA inspector would cite Triple D for animal-welfare violations and require some improvements. But time and time again, the inspector reported: "No non-compliant items identified during this inspection."

After about seven years, Keepers was growing increasingly frustrated, but she was hanging on to the belief that she might have a chance to take over the business one day soon. She claims Deist had promised that he was going to hand her the reins in a couple of years; she was told she was even in his will. She believed in the value of photography game farms providing an experience for photographers that they wouldn't get anywhere else. "There are people that unfortunately can't go out into the backwoods and go trekking into the wild to capture true wildlife photography," she says. "Who are we to say that they shouldn't have that opportunity if done right?"

Keepers' biggest gripes were Deist's alleged reluctance to take sick and injured animals for veterinary care and, she claims, his fixation with breeding. Instead of mating one pair of wolves, he would breed four, she alleges. "One year, we had eight fox kits, and then other fox litters on top of that," she says. "Foxes are hard to sell." Sometimes she tried to help find homes for them. In May 2019, she advertised red-fox kits and coyote pups for sale on a private Facebook page for exotic-pet owners.

Groo found the advertisement and posted a screenshot with a comment: "This is the heart of the issue, that these animals are seen only as disposable commodities – no different from used cars. This mentality must end."

Keepers defended the advertisement on behalf of Triple D. "Nothing to hide," she responded. "If I want to sell a car, I'm going to post it on Autotrader." She stressed that the company was operating legally and ethically.

Then Keepers grew quiet.

"I was like, 'What happened with Heather?'" Groo says. "I just had the sense that she left because she couldn't consciously stomach what she was seeing anymore."

It would be more than a year after posting that ad that Keepers reached out to Groo and blew the whistle.

THE FIRST photography game farm in the U.S. began with a letter to Walt Disney. Lloyd Beebe, a dairy farmer, hunter, and amateur cameraman in Sequim, Washington, had a dream: "Someday, I hope that I can stop milking cows and spend all of my time out in the wilderness shooting animals with a camera," he told a friend. He knew Disney was starting a TV show called *True-Life Adventures,* and he wrote to the Disney company hoping that his films might be a fit.

Beebe was a cougar bounty hunter – in one year alone, he killed 33 of the big cats. He also kept one as a pet in his home. His first short film, *The Little Archer,* in 1949, starred his four-year-old son Melvin alongside the cougar and two other wild animals that he'd tamed, a deer and a bear cub. The Disney folks liked Beebe's footage, and they soon began hiring him to film animals on movie locations and at his 80-plus-acre Washington farm.

As Beebe's success grew, his homestead became known as "Walt Disney's Wild Animal Ranch." In his book, Beebe writes about the secret to taming the animals that he trapped in the woods and getting them to perform: habituation and food rewards. As one of the animal handlers working on Disney's 1958 Oscar-winning *True-Life Adventure White Wilderness,* Beebe trained a pair of wild wolverines captured by Canadian park rangers to lick raw eggs from his fingers, and he slept next to them at night.

Some other stories about how animals starring in *White Wilderness* were treated, however, are not so tender. The film became the poster production for the mistreatment of animals. In 1982, the Canadian Broadcasting Company aired a special titled *Cruel Camera,* showing a clip from *White Wilderness* in which a polar bear cub dramatically tumbles from a steep icy incline, somersaulting over and over down the slope until it crashes into a pile of boulders. In another sequence, the filmmakers re-created a myth about how wild lemmings "commit suicide" by jumping off cliffs. A former *White Wilderness* cameraman told the CBC that wild lemmings were caught by children in Churchill, Manitoba, and shipped to the movie set in Calgary, where they were pitched off a rocky ledge into the "Arctic Ocean," which was actually the Bow River running through town. The lemmings all drowned. When CBC interviewed Walt Disney's nephew Roy, who produced the *True-Life Adventures* series during his era, Disney expressed remorse that animals had died. He also said, "We lost a few lemmings, OK. The lemmings probably would have gotten lost anyway."

As a handful of outspoken Hollywood actors and advocacy groups protested the entertainment industry's inhumane treatment of animals in the 1980s and the 1990s, photographers and filmmakers flocked to photography game farms. The most popular among them were Minnesota Wildlife Connections in Sandstone, Minnesota, Animals of Montana in Bozeman, and Triple D.

In 1993, Nat Geo WILD host and executive producer Casey Anderson was an 18-year-old animal trainer at Animals of Montana. He was amazed to be rubbing shoulders with "some of the biggest names in wildlife photography," he tells me.

He also remembers witnessing the "dirty work" behind the camera scenes. For one, the "ugliness of the business" breeding the animals for babies, a magnet for photography clients. But only a few babies from each litter starred in the photo shoots, he says – the extras would often mysteriously disappear. "We never asked questions," he says. "It was one of those things, like 'Where's the baby fox?' We knew, but we didn't want to know." Then one day, Anderson says, he witnessed something he'll never forget. "There was this older mountain lion male named Seymour that didn't want to work, and he was there just to mate with females," he says. He remembers the day when, he says, Animals of Montana owner Troy Hyde "shot Seymour in the head." Later, as Anderson and another employee numbly put Seymour in the back of his truck, he thought, " 'What the fuck?' We loved that animal. We'd taken care of him. He was one of our friends."

This was the "economics" of the business, Anderson says. "He can't feed all these animals. They're not making money, earning their keep. But you still every year have that need for babies – everybody wants babies. So you've got to continue the mating game. It's a big reason I stopped working there. I just couldn't do it. You can't love animals and be a part of something like that."

In response to these accusations, Hyde says Anderson was a "disgruntled employee," who "lives in a big glass house and he's throwing a lot of boulders." He says he has never shot his animals, including Seymour, who he maintains was euthanized by a veterinarian because he was 11 years old and suffering from dementia.

Hyde, who once talked to a news reporter about sharing spaghetti dinners and watching football with his grizzly bear Adam, has spent a lifetime working with animals, sometimes illegally. In 2005, he was convicted as a member of a multistate wildlife-trafficking ring buying and selling endangered tigers. His license was suspended for two years, but animal-rights activists say he should have lost it forever.

In 2012, two grizzly bears at Hyde's ranch on the outskirts of Bozeman mauled to death a 24-year-old employee named Benjamin Cloutier, who was cleaning cages. One of the bears had to be shot to recover Cloutier's body. An investigation into the incident found a previous unreported injury to an employee whose skull was lacerated by a mountain lion, and numerous undocumented animal escapes. Hyde says he has no response to that accusation.

"If he hadn't gotten his license back, Benjamin Cloutier would probably still be alive today," says Brittany Peet, an attorney with the nonprofit People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals Foundation (PETA).

For his part, Hyde says, "That's bullshit."

Still, Hyde paid a $9,000 fine for safety violations and settled a wrongful death lawsuit with Cloutier's family – but Animals of Montana continued to operate. In 2015, one of Hyde's tigers got loose on a photo shoot with photographer David Yarrow in the historic Packard Plant in Detroit. A video of the incident surfaced on social media, showing a man at the scene trying to corral the tiger huddled on a fourth-story staircase using a blue tarp and a weed wacker.

When I ask Yarrow about what happened, he denies that the tiger ever got loose. "It just fell asleep," he tells me. "It was just sleeping, and there was someone on set who, for whatever reason, wanted to make a story out of it." Hyde likewise denies that the tiger was out of his control.

Montana revoked Hyde's license in 2017, and the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the agency that oversees the care of exotic animals and exhibitor authorizations, terminated his federal license last October. In April, PETA filed a complaint to the USDA alleging that Hyde used the alias "Tom" to advertise wolves and a lynx on exoticanimalsforsale.net, a website for eccentric pet buyers, without an animal license as recently as December 2023. Hyde denied the accusations and says he's out of the entertainment business. He claims that he no longer has any animals, including as of March the bear Adam. "I had him euthanized by a veterinarian," Hyde says, at 24 years old. "He got to a point where he couldn't get up no more. His back legs failed him. He was starting to drag himself around. I've always been a firm believer of letting them go with dignity."

Hyde's bad-boy rival in the photography game-farm industry is Lee Marvin Greenly, 63, a twice-convicted felon and owner of Minnesota Wildlife Connection, which operated illegally for years after his license was revoked for animal-welfare violations. Greenly's most infamous stunt was a plan to make country-music singer Troy Gentry look like a badass bear hunter. (Gentry died in a 2017 helicopter accident.) Back in 2004, Greenly's tame bear Cubbie needed some dental work, but instead of fixing the bear's teeth, he sold a canned hunt to Gentry for $4,650. In a video broadcast on the internet, Gentry smiles at the camera from his tree stand, watching Cubbie, oblivious, ambling into his fenced woodland enclosure. Then Gentry aims and shoots Cubbie with an arrow, fatally wounding the bear. Cubbie tries to get away, but Gentry shoots another arrow. Then he gives a big thumbs-up to the camera. "Wow, what an experience," Gentry feigns, breathing hard. "This is awesome. Great black bear hunting up here in north Minnesota with Lee Greenly. I'll get you hooked up."

"The USDA is failing to protect animals at the facilities it's supposed to regulate," says one expert, "even when inspectors document suffering and death."

A DEAD WOLF was Keepers' breaking point. On the morning of May 11, 2020, she discovered that Cila, a nine-year-old wolf that she'd raised from birth, had been mauled to death in her cage by an Arctic wolf that was newly arrived from Europe. Keepers was livid that Deist appeared to blame her for the incident because she was the person who put the wolves together. She challenged him, saying he had approved the plan. She remembers him arguing and telling her to "shut your fucking mouth," and to get off the property.

Keepers didn't go to work for a couple of days; she says Deist wanted to talk things over, but she would only agree if she could record the conversation, a tape of which she later shared with me. "You told me to leave," Keepers charged. "And I said, 'You want me to leave?' And you said, 'I'll leave it up to you.' And then the final comment:

Melissa Groo (left) and Keepers were adversaries but have united to take down Triple D, which Groo says treats animals as a "disposable commodity."

'You can leave, we'll make other plans for the business. I don't need you.' "

Deist told her that they'd been like family – and families fight sometimes. He couldn't remember what he said, but he was sorry and he wanted to reconcile. Clients were arriving in the morning – they needed Keepers to be there.

She reluctantly agreed to go back to work the next day, but she'd come to the conclusion that the Deists never intended for her to take over the business. She says she asked them if they would let her fundraise to build some bigger enclosures for the animals. They agreed to consider it, she says, but then told her that they didn't want charity. Deist offered an area where they could build some new enclosures, Keepers says, but in her opinion, the plan was "jerry-rigged."

That was when she began focusing on a new mission: going public with what she knew went on behind the scenes at Triple D.

Keepers started documenting everything in pictures and videos – animal enclosures, veterinary and business records, emails about animal purchases – and preparing her colleagues, Justine Hayes and Jenny Kirk, to take over the animal training when she left.

Hayes and Kirk knew they were in for a rough transition. Keepers had strong bonds with most of the animals – she raised many of them – and big, dangerous cats, wolves, and bears often don't adapt well to change. If the animals didn't work well with their new trainers, they would be useless for photo shoots, and therefore stuck in their cages, or sold elsewhere.

"When I made the decision to leave, it was the hardest thing I've ever done," Keepers tells me. "It's like walking away from your kids." But she was committed to it because she felt that she had to do something.

On July 8, 2020, Keepers hugged and kissed the animals goodbye and left Triple D for good. The Deists told clients that she left to be with a boyfriend – it was for personal reasons that had nothing to do with them.

In the aftermath, the vibe at Triple D was "frantic," says Kirk, describing how the Deists didn't seem to know what to do next. Hayes was promoted to head trainer, and their jobs working with large predators suddenly felt even more dangerous. "There were a lot of situations that Justine and I got put into that we didn't feel comfortable doing," Kirk says, "but felt like we had to." One particular mountain lion named Dee Dee did not want to work with them. "There were a few times when [Dee Dee] got this crazy look in her eye," Kirk says. "Justine and I would look at each other like 'This might be it.' "

Kirk says they told Deist that they were feeling unsafe. She tells me how in the Back 40 the enclosures didn't seem secure. "Animals could reach their paws through and grab you while you were feeding them," she recalls.

They also shared their concerns and fears with Keepers. Before long, they joined her crusade against Triple D. All three women had signed nondisclosure agreements when they took their jobs, but figured that the cost of breaking those contracts would be worth it if they could shut down Triple D. What's more, the three women started working closely with a filmmaker who is creating a documentary about game-farm photography.

Keepers warned the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) that they believed Deist was planning to illegally purchase a pair of endangered snow-leopard kittens from a seller in Minnesota. Similar activity – unlawfully purchasing protected lion cubs – landed *Tiger King* star "Doc" Antle a suspended two-year prison sentence and a $10,000 fine.

They felt somewhat vindicated in June 2021, when a USDA veterinary medical officer accompanied the agent who had been doing Triple D's animal-welfare inspections. After years of flawless evaluations from that agent, Triple D received a 42-page report detailing serious animal-welfare violations, including confining animals in unsafe and unsanitary enclosures filled with feces, rotting food, and unclean water receptacles. "Many of these receptacles have a green coating on the interior surface in contact with the water, and some of the water receptacles have dead flies and floating debris," the officer wrote. Surveying an area where smaller animals are caged, she noted, "There is an excessive accumulation and buildup of dirt, grime, fur, and urine on shift doors and enclosure walls."

A spokesperson for the USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service said he could not answer questions about the inspector or Triple D. "We don't expand beyond what is already included in our inspection reports," he writes, providing a statement that the agency works with facilities to ensure compliance with Animal Welfare Act regulations. When issues arise, the statement says, "we work hard to bring them back into compliance as quickly as possible."

Deist was given the opportunity to correct the problems without penalty.

When Groo found out about the report, she posted an article on Facebook headlined "Photography game farm Triple D Wildlife cited 6 times for keeping animals in squalor" with a comment: "More on Triple D photo game farm. What a disgrace to treat these magnificent animals so poorly. It's time for these wildlife brothels to be done." She also implored photographers and artists planning to hold workshops at Triple D to cancel them. "It would be unconscionable to continue to support this facility," she wrote, tagging some of the people leading workshops there.

Deist's attorney sent a letter to the company's clients stating that "disgruntled" former employees and associates were trying to destroy Triple D's good name with false and malicious accusations. These malcontents and their baseless complaints to the USDA had triggered a two-day inspection, the letter explained. After which, "the lead inspector commended the staff on the high quality of animal care and stated the health and condition of Triple D Wildlife was 'one of the best' she had seen in the industry."

Vermont law professor Delcianna Winders said that even though the department's documented findings were very critical of the conditions at Triple D, it's rare that anything is ever done to properly enforce even basic animal-welfare standards. "The USDA is, without a doubt, failing to protect animals at the facilities it is supposed to regulate," she says. "Even when the agency's own inspectors document egregious violations involving suffering and even death, the agency fails to take meaningful action. On top of that, it continues to renew the facilities' licenses to exhibit animals."

JAY DEIST is no stranger to the courts. After he divorced his first wife, Cynthia, in 1996, he fought to avoid paying out-of-pocket orthodontics treatments and contact lenses for one of their daughters. While he was still employed by the Forest Service, he battled with a whistleblower at a logging company who said he'd threatened her. The court sided with Deist, who then sued her for damaging his reputation. He won.

Deist wasn't going to let these four women smear his name and destroy his business. He filed lawsuits against Keepers, Hayes, and [*Cont. on 81*]

CARLA RHODES

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Reviews

Music

DUA LIPA FINDS HER BLISS

The pop megastar follows 'Future Nostalgia' with an LP that searches for a chiller groove

By ANGIE MARTOCCIO

Dua Lipa
Radical Optimism
WARNER

IN THE VIDEO for Dua Lipa's *Barbie* hit, "Dance the Night," an enormous disco ball crashes onto the floor, the bottom half of its mirrors shattering into a million pieces. In an interview, her collaborator Mark Ronson theorized that it signified the end of Lipa's disco era, putting a bow on 2020's now-classic *Future Nostalgia*.

Released during the pandemic, that blockbuster LP turned Lipa into a household name and ushered a disco revival into the pop galaxy. The present was bleak, but *Future Nostalgia* promised one hell of a good time. Four years later, Lipa has finally released her highly-anticipated new album, *Radical Optimism*. The cover art features her out in the ocean, appearing ➔

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Radical chic: Dua Lipa

DUA LIPA

calm despite a looming great white shark. She says the album title refers to "the idea of going through chaos gracefully and feeling like you can weather any storm." While working on it, Lipa listened to Blur, Oasis, and other Brit-pop bands she grew up hearing on the radio. She was so inspired by psychedelia that she enlisted Kevin Parker of Tame Impala, who co-wrote, co-produced, and played on many of the tracks here (among other collaborators).

Turns out Ronson was right, or sort of right. "End of the Era" is a tripped-out dance-pop banger, a party in paradise where Lipa is so giddy in the club she busts out some *la-la-la-la-la*'s. "These Walls" has a gorgeous melody, and whimsical opening lines ("Maybe we should switch careers/'Cause, baby, you know no one beats our poker faces") that will rattle in your head for days – the mark of a true pop professor.

Lipa's voice sounds stronger than ever on *Radical Optimism*. Just listen to the sleek, ABBA-esque single "Training Season" and you can hear these raw, velvety pipes bring a song about mediocre dudes to life. That same voice shines on the closing track, "Happy for You," which sees Lipa ending a relationship on good terms, with nothing but respect for her ex's new relationship. The song aches with maturity and grace, and culminates in happy tears. Lipa has bid farewell to disco, but you can still see a flickering of glitter in these new songs.

Unfortunately, Lipa sometimes sounds so chill that the music loses energy and starts to blur into a blissed-out glaze. Several of the songs on the second half of the record come off like background music, especially compared with potent past highlights like "Physical." Ultimately, what you at times get is a watered-down version of *Future Nostalgia,* a record that feels adrift – even from Lipa herself. We didn't expect her to cover Blur's "Tender," or drop her own line of lava lamps, but we were hoping for something a little more distinct.

Lipa never needed to make "Future Nostalgia Part Two." No one expected her to be trapped in Studio 54 forever. Like any artist, she's bound to evolve and expand her catalog, making records that capture where she's at in life at any given time. But as of right now, it's not entirely clear where she is on *Radical Optimism*. Perhaps that's the point. ®

TYRONE LEBON

MDOU MOCTAR'S GUITAR GLORY

A towering African musician mixes mind-blowing solos and an urgent political message By JON DOLAN

HEAR THIS

Mdou Moctar
Funeral for Justice
MATADOR

IN 2021, Mdou Moctar told ROLLING STONE, "My music is going to become more inspired by revolution." That promise was truth in advertising. For more than a decade, the Tuareg guitarist/singer-songwriter, who fronts the band that shares his name, has been staking out a space as a radical guitar innovator as well as a fearless spokesman for his strife-riven homeland of Niger. As he asks in Tuareg on the opening track on his band's excellent new LP, *Funeral for Justice,* "Dear African leaders, hear my burning question/Why does your ear only heed France and America?" His band's swarming attack and his searing solos turn that position-paper directness into a rousing call to arms.

Moctar (right) and crew

Moctar has been making his own revolution since he was a kid, fashioning his first guitar in defiance of his strict parents' anti-music edict. On albums like 2019's *Ilana (The Creator)* and the 2021 breakthrough *Afrique Victime,* he and his band combined the earthy, ethereal guitar fire of Tuareg music with Moctar's Stratocaster pyrotechnics, which can plausibly bring to mind Eric Clapton, Jimi Hendrix, and his early influence, Eddie Van Halen.

Funeral for Justice is the band's most forceful album yet, tailor-made to melt minds at massive festivals. "Imouhar" opens with rippling guitars and call-and-response, rendered with a low-fi distance, before the sound becomes brighter and bigger, and rhythm guitarist Ahmoudou Madassane, drummer Souleymane Ibrahim, and bassist Mikey Coltun provide a charging, circular backing for Moctar's clarion shredding. "Tchinta" opens with Moctar's voice echoing like a herald over a chasm of prescient distortion, before the band takes off at a gallop. "Sousoume Tamacheq" starts with dense feedback worthy of Sonic Youth, then bursts into overdrive, with Moctar's guitar pushing out dense clusters of frenetic notes over the band's relentless precision.

Funeral for Justice is full of anti-colonial and anti-corruption declarations; "France's actions are frequently veiled in cruelty/We are better off without its turbulent relation," Moctar offers on "Oh France," which manages to feel sprawling yet dramatically urgent. "Imajighen" is a call for African solidarity that fittingly stays closer to home musically in its acoustic desert-blues beauty. "Modern Slaves" closes the set with a plea; after mostly blasting away for the entire album, the band locks into a steely yet somber, mainly acoustic groove as it demands answers from the global powers that be: "Oh, world, why be so selective about human beings/My people are crying while you laugh," with Moctar's voice – and his ax – lighting us toward a freer tomorrow.

FROM TOP: WH MOUSTAPHA; LAUREN HARRIS

BREAKING

Rachel Chinouriri's Real-Talk Alt-Pop

RACHEL CHINOURIRI, a London-based artist of Zimbabwean descent, made waves in 2022 with "All I Ever Asked," a catchy indie-pop tune that dresses down a disappointing romantic partner. On her debut, *What a Devastating Turn of Events,* her songs are sharply observed and unsparingly real — whether she's cataloging her own relationship snafus in "Dumb-Bitch Juice" or fighting against oppressive beauty standards on "I Hate Myself." Set to music that ranges from bracing alt-rock to rainy-day folk to brisk bedroom pop, it makes for a rich, introspective tapestry. **J.D.**

Gosling and Blunt get ready to call "Action!"

Movies

CRASH, BANG, AND PUNCH-DRUNK LOVE

'The Fall Guy' starts as a love letter to stunt performers. It ends up paying tribute to the power of movie stars By DAVID FEAR

The Fall Guy

STARRING Ryan Gosling, Emily Blunt, Aaron Taylor-Johnson, Hannah Waddingham, Winston Duke, Stephanie Hsu

DIRECTED BY David Leitch

THEY TAKE THE punches, they crash the cars, they're the unknown stuntmen and stuntwomen who risk their lives to entertain you. In a world where VFX rules the roost, these fearless performers are the people you call when you need someone to plummet out of a helicopter onto a flaming speedboat.

Still, I'm not sure anyone was begging for an adaptation of the Eighties TV series featuring Lee Majors as a stuntman who busted criminals in his off hours. Many people still want to watch unbelievably charming, photogenic actors do the kiss-kiss-bang-bang tango as their faces are projected 20 feet high, however – especially if one of them is the Ken Who Would Be King.

Welcome to *The Fall Guy*, a movie that borrows elements from that Reagan-era prime-time Cheez Whiz, then burns rubber while going its own way. Yes, it doubles as a way for former stuntman turned director David Leitch (*Atomic Blonde*) to pay tribute to his bruised, battered brethren. But it's really about the rush of watching Ryan Gosling and Emily Blunt making goo-goo eyes at each other in between the occasional explosions, shootouts, and industry in-jokes.

Gosling is Colt Seavers, longtime stunt double for the world's biggest action star/diva Tom Ryder (Aaron Taylor-Johnson). He's been spending a lot of time on his latest shoot nuzzling up to Jody Moreno (Blunt), the camera operator. What should be a simple 12-story fall turns into an accident, however, and sends him to the hospital. Cut to 18 months later, and Seavers is parking cars. His life's in an existential tailspin.

Then Ryder's longtime agent (*Ted Lasso*'s Hannah Waddingham) says she needs Seavers to get to Sydney ASAP. Her star client has lost his new stunt double, putting his latest sci-fi action blockbuster in jeopardy. The catch is that Jody's the director. It's his chance to rekindle their romance. Call "Action," and Seavers is fearless. When it comes to matters of the heart – he's just Colt!

Once he's on set, Seavers gets a frosty reception from the woman he essentially ghosted. Jody is angry, but she's also quietly thrilled to see Colt again. It's a classic rom-com setup, in other words, that just happens to involve someone doing a life-threatening car roll. There's also a murder mystery, a chase involving a garbage truck, a crotch-biting dog, and Gosling (or rather, his stunt doubles) running, jumping, and driving like a maniac. Leitch does his usual choreographed fights and bullet ballets. The film's supporting players, which include Winston Duke as the movie's stunt coordinator and Stephanie Hsu as Ryder's assistant, get to crack wise and steal scenes.

Gosling takes one giant leap of faith.

But *The Fall Guy* is at its delirious best not when it's ginning up sound and fury and mayhem, but when it simply lets Gosling and Blunt trade screwball banter and give every scene they share a will-they-won't-they tension. No one needs to be told that Gosling has excellent comic chops at this point, especially after that epic "I'm Just Ken" at the Oscars. And we don't need to be sold on the fact that these two actors have extraordinary chemistry together either. Several hours after seeing *The Fall Guy*, you may forget the majority of the movie's rock-'em-sock-'em stunts. But you'll likely remember a long confessional exchange between Colt and Jody conducted with bullhorns. Or, in the film's standout scene, a meta-conversation via a split screen that sees Blunt making excellent use of a prop alien hand.

So much of the crash-boom-bang feels indistinguishable from a dozen other action films released in the past two years, or five years, or past few decades. And then Gosling and Blunt start flirting and fighting with each other, and you feel like you're floating an inch above your seat. *The Fall Guy* starts off as Leitch's love letter to those behind-the-scenes heroes who make the movies thrilling. It ends as a tribute to movie stars, reminding us that the greatest special effect remains a close-up of two people who happen to be famous exchanging kisses, retorts, or simply a look. *That's* entertainment!

UNIVERSAL PICTURES, 2.

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FREEDOM PARK

[*Cont. from 41*] Angelou put it, having encountered many defeats, but undefeated.

There's the railroad and river, both delivery networks for human cargo. Court Square is also nearby, at one time one of the largest slave markets in the South, and the Alabama State Capitol building, which served as the Confederate Capitol when Montgomery was named the first political capital of the Confederacy in 1861.

Civil Rights Movement history is another current running through the city. Both Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King Jr. emerged as movement leaders from the Montgomery bus boycott, which began in 1955 and culminated in 1956 in the desegregation of public transportation throughout the country.

In 1961, future congressman John Lewis and other Freedom Riders survived a brutal attack by a white mob at the Montgomery Greyhound bus station. Four years later, in 1965, activists marching from Selma to Montgomery to demand voting rights persisted despite terrorist violence, their bloody example inspiring the introduction of the Voting Rights Act to Congress by Lyndon Johnson.

The Freedom Monument Sculpture Park succeeds in bringing this epic history to life. How could I not feel something on such hallowed ground, staring up at the soaring National Monument to Freedom, scanning the vast list of surnames and finding my own, "Ramsey," carved into steel in a row at the bottom right of the monument?

According to the 1870 Census, the first year in which formerly enslaved Black people were officially counted as people and citizens, Ramseys were piecing together free lives all over the country. Data made available by EJI to all visitors further shows a large number, 309, in Georgia, 75 of whom were living in Columbia County. I know from family research that these are my Ramseys.

I have been working to identify the right slaver for decades, in part by eavesdropping on genealogy message boards. On occasion, the white Ramseys reference slaves and plantations explicitly while discussing wills and other property records, allowing me to confirm names, dates, and locations connected to my ancestors. (I'd announce my presence and make targeted appeals if I weren't afraid of being blocked.)

These Black people – part Nigerian, part Cameroonian, part English and Irish – likely took their name from a white man who owned them. It's likely all they took with them when finally freed. Despite their bleak entry into American life, I imagine some also had the irreverence, optimism, good taste, good teeth, hairpin triggers, and heart of the Ramseys I have been blessed to know in this life. I doubt I'd be here if they didn't.

Do I feel hopeful? Not yet, but certainly encouragement from a "great cloud of witnesses" to "throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us."

As the sun sets over the park, casting long shadows across its sculptures, one cannot help but feel a sense of reverence and awe at its grand existence. In the face of legislative assaults on diversity and equity, the Freedom Monument Sculpture Park is one space where the voices of the past echo through the present, where wounds of history are disinfected by the light of truth.

BILLIE EILISH

[*Cont. from 59*] exhales and inches back farther on the couch. "I should have a Ph.D. in masturbation," she says.

Eilish and I spend a lot of time talking about the new era she is about to kick off, and how she'll promote *Hit Me Hard and Soft* while prioritizing her mental health, privacy, and well-being. With all of that in mind, I wonder if she's ready for journalists to pepper her with questions about the album's subject matter, particularly the sexual nature of that one crushed-out track. "That song was actually part of what helped me become who I am, to be real," Eilish says. "I wrote some of it before even doing anything with a girl, and then wrote the rest after. I've been in love with girls for my whole life, but I just didn't understand – until, last year, I realized I wanted my face in a vagina. I was never planning on talking about my sexuality ever, in a million years. It's really frustrating to me that it came up."

Eilish is referring to her interview with *Variety* last fall, in which she mentioned she was attracted to women. The quote – "I'm attracted to them for real" – became a national headline. The following month, Eilish attended *Variety*'s Hitmakers event in L.A. While on the red carpet, she was asked if she intentionally came out in the story. "No, I didn't," she told them. "But I kind of thought, 'Wasn't it obvious?' " Eilish then posted about it on Instagram, with a caption that read, "Thanks Variety for my award and for also outing me on a red carpet at 11 a.m. instead of talking about anything else that matters. I like boys and girls leave me alone about it please literally who cares."

Looking back, Eilish admits she overreacted with the Instagram post. "Who fucking cares?" she says. "The whole world suddenly decided who I was, and I didn't get to say anything or control any of it. Nobody should be pressured into being one thing or the other, and I think that there's a lot of wanting labels all over the place. Dude, I've known people that don't know their sexuality, or feel comfortable with it, until they're in their forties, fifties, sixties. It takes a while to find yourself, and I think it's really unfair, the way that the internet bullies you into talking about who you are and what you are."

As for that red-carpet quote that made all the headlines, Eilish says she tried to think of a response that would be entertaining for her fans and the internet. "I went into Billie Eilish interview mode, [like], 'Oh, I don't care. Yeah, I'll say whatever. Wasn't it obvious?' " she says. "And then afterwards I was like, 'Wait. It wasn't obvious to me.' "

Thinking about it now, she draws a bigger lesson from that moment. "I know everybody's been thinking this about me for years and years, but I'm only figuring out myself now," she says. "And honestly, what I said was funny, because I really was just saying what they've all been saying." She adds that she liked the journalist she was talking to and didn't want to be rude. But she still felt exploited. "Bro, I have asthma out here," she says. "I fucking can't take a breath."

If Eilish had the opportunity to do it over again on the red carpet, she says, she wouldn't have answered the question. But she acknowledges it could have been worse. "I'm lucky enough to be in a time when I'm able to say something like that and things go OK for me," she says. "And that's not how a lot of people's experience is."

TWO DAYS AFTER the interview, Eilish calls me from her cellphone. She's anxiously driving around Los Angeles, unable to shake the feeling that she told me too much. She laughs when I tell her where I am (the handbag department of Saks Fifth Avenue in New York, shopping with my mother-in-law), and we make plans to meet up again the following week.

Back in L.A., Eilish greets me at a different studio; she doesn't work in conventional studios, but she enjoys hanging out in them. She's wearing a black Monster Energy drink T-shirt that reaches to her ankles (she says it's Willy Chavarria, the game-changing New York fashion designer). She takes me into the control room basked in blue lighting, where we sit on opposite ends of a couch.

Eilish thanks me for doing another interview. "I have overshared my whole life," she tells me. "It's compulsive, like I need to tell you every single detail about something. That was part of my thing when I was first starting out. I just didn't give a fuck, and I said anything."

Eilish says that our talks were therapeutic for her. They were the first non-*Barbie* interviews she'd done in more than a year, and she was more than ready to discuss this new music she's been sitting on. But she's also been forced to rethink how much of herself – and her art – she's willing to give away.

"I feel like I've been beaten down to feel this way," Eilish tells me. "The way that the world has treated me into feeling extremely anxious about everything that I say. It's really exhausting when anything I say can become a headline, completely taken out of context, and it leads to constant paranoia."

She wants to clarify a few things. Most of all, she has zero interest in being a spokesperson for mental health. "I think it's really weird when you are in the middle of something and somebody asks you to be the advocate for the thing you're in the middle of," she says. "I understand that it's important, and I understand that it's an epidemic and it needs to be talked about, but I don't want to fucking be the role model for depression. What happens when I do some shit y'all aren't going to like?"

If Eilish wants to be an inspiration for anything, let it be her commitment to environmentalism. She's spoken out against the climate crisis and promoted sustainability on tour, partnering with her mom's nonprofit, Support + Feed, which aims to combat climate change and increase food security through a plant-based food system. "I have never had an interest in being a role model, ever," she says. "If you're going to think I'm a role model, think I'm a role model in terms of trying to save the environment, and being more conscious of the way that you live, and your carbon footprint, and your contribution to animal agriculture."

Eilish has officially decided to make some changes to the way she presents herself to the world. "This album, to me, feels like a way to restart, in terms of my sharing," she says. So let's take a second to reintroduce Billie Eilish, the home-schooled bohemian who captured our attention as a teenager. She's 22 now, yet she's more self-aware than people twice her age. She would like some space to grow, to figure out exactly who she is – no label required. She is not the poster child for anything. And she is not, she'd like to note, a TED Talk speaker. So where does that leave us? Eilish sums things up with four simple words that point to her desire for normalcy and acceptance.

"I'm just a girl."

[*Cont. from 73*] Kirk, charging that they violated their nondisclosure agreements and interfered with his company, costing him at least $100,000 in lost revenue. In a connected lawsuit against Groo, he accused her of running a harmful social media campaign against his business.

Groo filed a motion for the Montana District Court to dismiss the suit on the basis that Montana has no jurisdiction over what she, a resident of Ithaca, New York, writes on the internet. But the court upheld the ruling. In March 2023, the case was considered by the Montana Supreme Court, where one justice raised the question at the heart of the case:

What is the difference between Groo's Facebook comment and a review of a business published online? The answer, according to the Montana Supreme Court's 4-3 ruling last October, is that Groo intentionally tagged people in Montana, and as a result, clients canceled contracts with Triple D.

Groo appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court, which rejected her case in March of this year. The lawsuits against Groo and the others can now move forward. In the employees' cases, their defense may be aided by whistleblower protections, according to Siri Nelson, executive director of the nonprofit National Whistleblower Center, because they were "conscientious insiders," trying to raise concerns that were not being welcomed or heeded.

In the meantime, some of the animal-welfare accusations made against Deist have also been alleged by the USDA. In November 2023, the agency filed a complaint against Triple D documenting multiple instances in which animals reportedly escaped from the facility and either died or were never recovered, and animal injuries and deaths that happened on the property. The allegations include the incident in which Cila the Arctic wolf was mauled to death and an episode in which a snow leopard lost two thirds of its tail in an attack by another leopard.

Yet less than six months prior to the USDA's complaint, the agency reported an initial inspection of a seemingly new facility called Rivers Edge LLC at the same address as Triple D. According to Keepers, the animals listed on the Rivers Edge inspection report are the same species that live in cramped cages on "the Back 40," tucked into cottonwoods and pines along the Whitefish River, out of sight from visitors.

"How in one breath can USDA bring this level of complaint against them all while going through the process and approving them for the same permits under a new name?" she says, frustrated. "I have no faith in this system."

In October, Lorney Deist (Jay's real name) advertised on exoticanimalsforsale.net that Rivers Edge was taking orders for 2024 babies, including badgers, otters, foxes, lynx, wolves, and bobcats.

When animal-welfare lawyer Winders examines the Rivers Edge license and inspection report, she tells me, "It appears that Jay is trying to hide behind this new business name. Notably the Animal Welfare Act regulations prohibit holding more than one license. Unfortunately, it is not unusual for those facing enforcement to try to illegally hide behind other licenses." She says that if the USDA revokes Triple D's license, "it will be illegal for Deist to engage in any Animal Welfare Act-regulated activities – exhibiting animals, dealing animals, etc. – ever, under any name."

Welfare groups are paying close attention to Deist's animal sales. Government documents show that last May, Deist attempted to sell Hershey, a tiger, and a black bear named Casey to a private collector in Texas. "Tigers are endangered," says PETA's Brittany Peet. "If that was in fact a sale – and it was marked as a sale – that would be illegal trafficking of an endangered species."

Her group has submitted a complaint to the FWS, which would not comment about the status of the inquiry. "If the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is able to substantiate that and they charge him for it, it would be a pretty big deal," Peet says. "Those are serious charges."

It's unclear what happened with the sale to the private collector, but it seems to have fallen through. Two months later, according to public records, Deist transferred ownership of Hershey to the Exotic Feline Rescue Center in Center Point, Indiana, where more than 100 big cats and other animals live on 260 acres. The center provides homes for exotic pets and retired circus animals that have been abandoned, abused, or are in need of a permanent place to live. According to the center's policies, it does not buy, sell, or breed animals or allow the public to have contact with them. The center also recently received a snow leopard, mountain lion, and two wolves from Triple D.

ON A SUNNY, warm morning when Keepers has a day off from her current job at the Louisville Slugger Hitting Science Center, she meets me at a Starbucks in La Grange, Kentucky. She's fresh from a half-hour HIIT exercise class, wearing yoga pants and a white tank top that says "If you're reading this, I hope something good happens to you today."

I climb into the passenger seat of her green SUV, where the car's ceiling console is decorated with a handful of wiry tiger whiskers collected during years of cleaning the big cats' cages. A long pheasant feather fans across the dash, and a leopard pendant necklace dangles from the rearview mirror.

She drives for three hours to the Exotic Feline Rescue Center. There, in a gravel parking lot, she quickly changes into jeans and a black hoodie, and then grabs a package of raw chicken wings from her trunk.

As we approach Hershey's large enclosure, the tiger recognizes Keepers, loudly chuffing – a tiger's version of a purr – moaning, and rubbing against the fencing. Keepers squats to scratch the big cat, and speaks sweetly to her through the grate. "She's always been very chatty," she tells me, offering the tiger a couple of chicken wings. "She was only a week old when we got her. They told us that we had a boy, but the health certificate said she was a girl. I was like, 'Nope, I think we got a Her-she, not a He-she.' That's how she got her name."

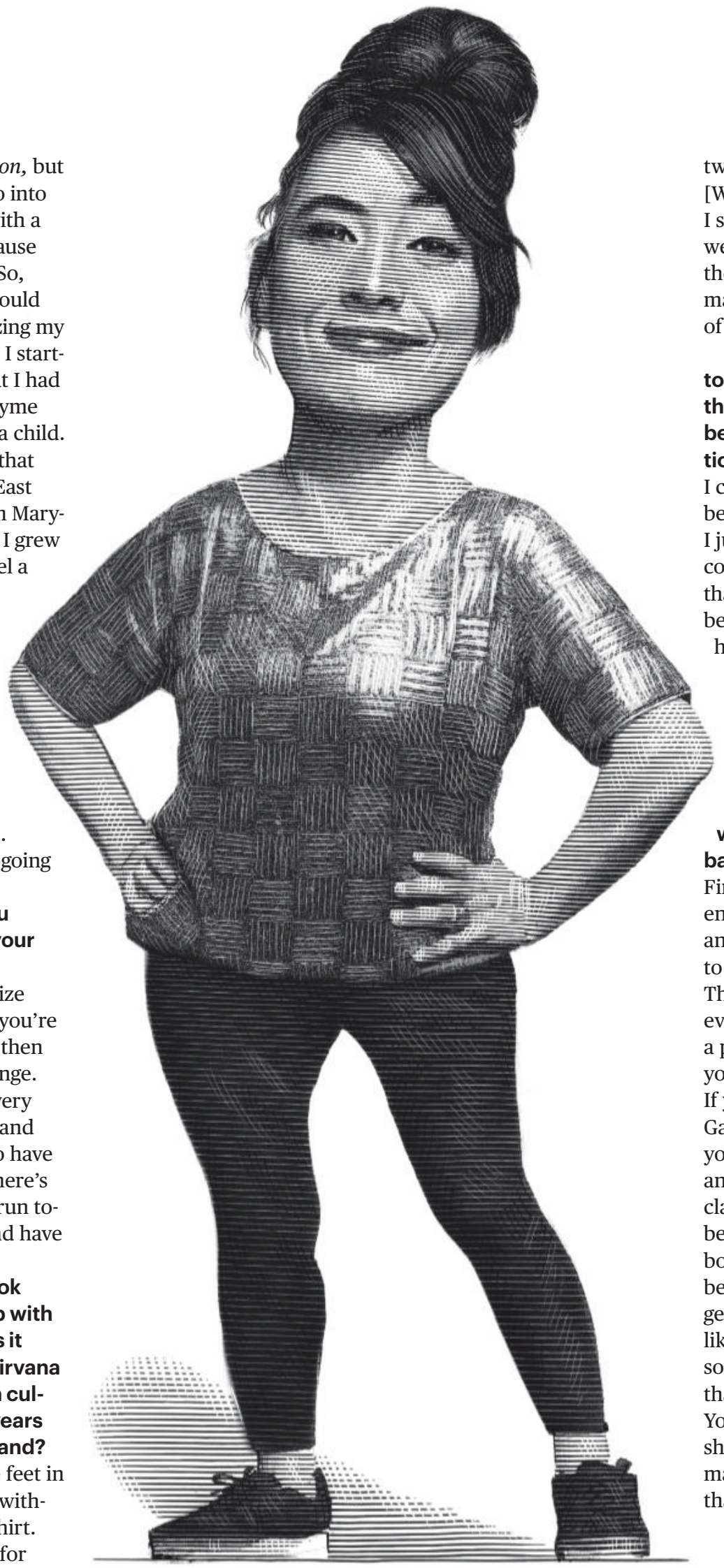
She tells the tiger to "sit," and the big cat quickly sits. "Good girl! What a good girl," Keepers says, as Hershey happily crunches on the wing bones. "Good job, big kitty. Good girl. What a good sit. I love you."

Keepers stays for a couple of hours, delivering chicken wings to Aryaa, the snow leopard, and the wolves, Roman and Ryggs. She hates to leave. "It's always hard to say goodbye," she tells me later. "But it's easier knowing where they're at and that they have each other. I know they're cared for."

Even in the face of the lawsuit, she's glad that she is speaking out about Triple D. "Most people who go there are avid animal lovers and think they're supporting something that's giving back to wildlife and conservation," she says. "Most people would be mortified at what they're supporting if they actually knew the truth. They deserve to know."

Kathleen Hanna

The punk icon on her memoir, Lyme disease, and Kurt Cobain



When did you decide to write a memoir?
I started five or six years ago. I was at this transitional point in my life – it was before Bikini Kill and Le Tigre started playing again – and I wasn't really sure what I was going to do next. I felt like I had to just write everything down that had happened, for myself, so I could move on to the next step. I needed to leave the Nineties behind.

Kathleen Hanna's memoir, 'Rebel Girl,' is out May 14 via Ecco.

You're so vulnerable and open in the book, particularly about the times you were sexually assaulted. Are you nervous about all that being out there?
Not really. It's not my problem. The people who did those things to me, they can have it now. I'm not going to hold their secrets for them anymore. I'm 55, and up until last year, I was taking responsibility for many of the sexual assaults I've experienced. It was my way to say I had agency. It wasn't about me feeling shitty about myself, it was more "Well, if I did this or that or this or that different, then this or that wouldn't have happened."

In the book, you write about your struggle with Lyme disease, and how you discovered that you had it since you were a kid.
I was a professional patient for many years, and I had a notebook that I would keep all of my lab tests in – like Tracy Flick from *Election,* but as a patient. I would go into every doctor's office with a written summary, because my memory was bad. So, if I had a good day, I would spend that day organizing my stuff. And part of what I started discovering was that I had actually been having Lyme symptoms since I was a child. There's a certain kind that I have that's from the East Coast, specifically from Maryland, and that's where I grew up. And it made me feel a little better, because I was like, "Oh, well, no wonder it got so bad – it was never treated." But I did get the right treatment, and I'm doing really, really well.

That's great.
I can tour. It's bananas. Who thought that was going to happen?

What advice do you wish you could give your younger self?
Get a therapist. Prioritize your mental health. If you're not enjoying your life, then something's got to change. We're only here for a very short amount of time, and you are not put here to have a shitty, sucky life. If there's things that you enjoy, run towards those things. And have a lot of sex.

You write in the book about your friendship with Kurt Cobain. How has it been for you to see Nirvana continue to be such a cultural force, even 30 years after the end of the band?
You cannot walk three feet in any country, any city, without seeing a Nirvana shirt. That's pretty amazing for two guys from Aberdeen [Washington] to do that. I see 80-year-old women wearing Nirvana shirts; I see them everywhere, and it makes me smile. I feel proud of them.

It must be very exciting to see art that meant something to you continue to be meaningful to generations of people.
I can't really listen to them because I get really sad, and I just really wish that Kurt could have enjoyed it. And that's the hard part – just being like, wow, I wish that he would've seen us live past the stupid Nineties "you're a sellout" thing. I wish he could just still be here, and making stuff.

What advice would you give to a girl who wanted to start a band now?
Find a friend that you really enjoy spending time with and ask them if they want to make music with you. Then just start with whatever you have. If you have a piano, your band is you, your friend, and the piano. If you have a computer with GarageBand, you can clap your hands into GarageBand, and then just sing over the clapping. It doesn't have to be guitar, drums, bass, keyboard, or manufactured beats. You don't have to be a genius. Make what you feel like making. Your first 20 songs are going to suck, but that's part of the process. You have to make your first shitty songs so that you can make your first good song, that you're like, "Oh, this is it. This is my first good song." ELISABETH GARBER-PAUL

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